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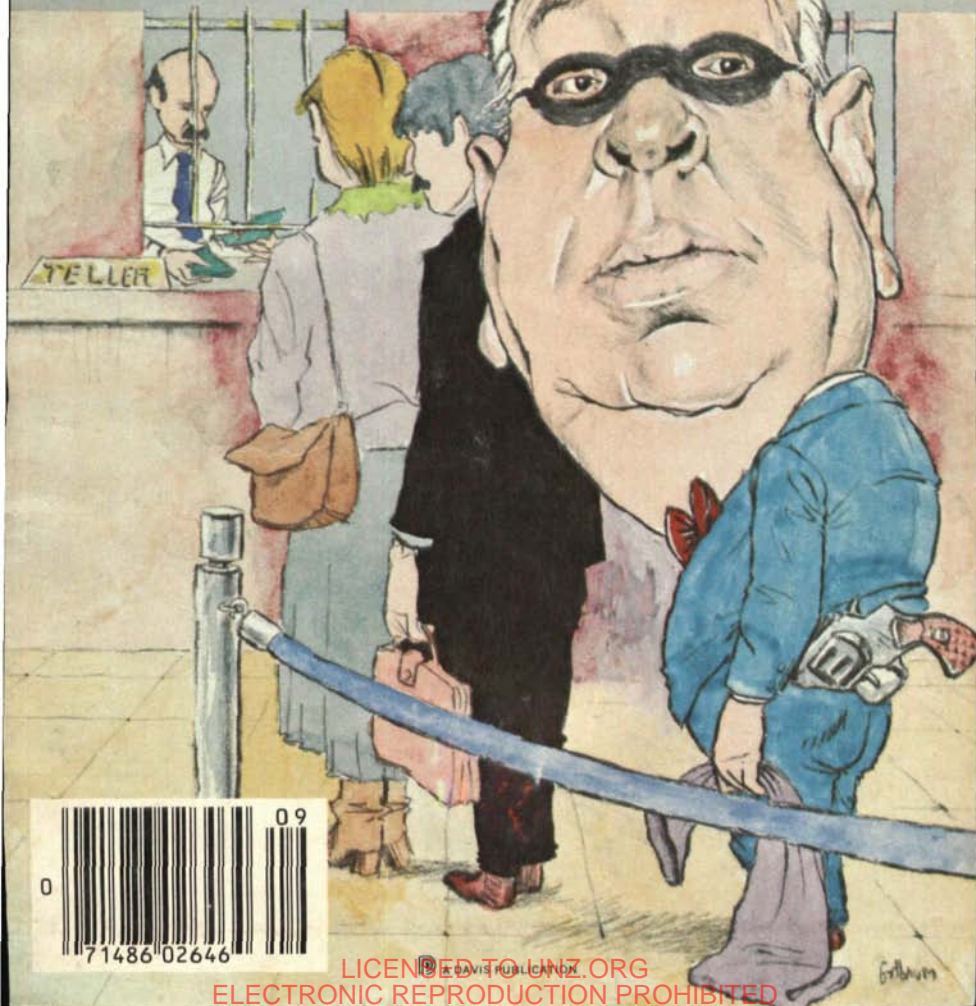
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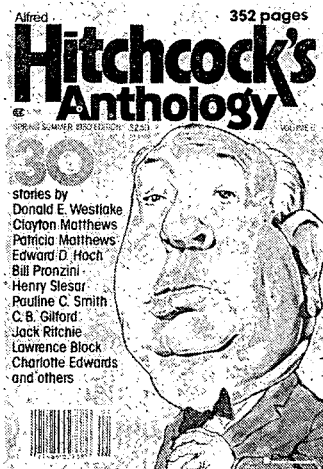
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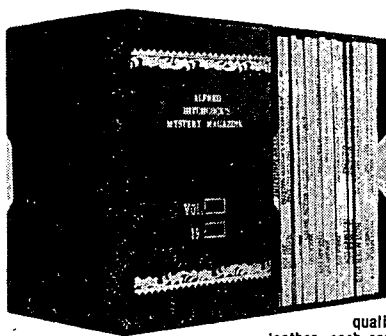
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February 27, 1980



Dear Reader:

This month we celebrate St. Valentine's Day (Valentine, you'll recall, was murdered) by sending cards, flowers, candy, or gifts to the ones we love, and this month's issue reflects this theme in an appropriately harrowing way.

The love an elderly couple feel for each other leads to trouble in Ernest Savage's charming "Not Worth Flypaper." In "The Missing Missile," William Bankier features a pair of lovers who "make Romeo and Juliet look like Maggie and Jiggs." A husband comes under suspicion when "A Rather Curious Corpse" turns up in Stephen Wasylyk's story. Mary Braund introduces us to a hapless—and loveless—young woman in "My Friend Adelaide." And you'll meet some characters who look like losers in life and in love in Robert Twohy's haunting story, "The System."

I think it's far from irrelevant to remind you at this time of Oscar Wilde's famous warning from "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" that "each man kills the thing he loves."

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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Pro-fessor Lawson was hired to find a missing hockey star . . .

THE MISSING MISSILE



by
**WILLIAM
BANKIER**

Professor Harry Lawson crumpled the air-mail envelope and dropped it on the floor as he carried his letter to the office window. A pale wash of November light in the London sky offered him a chance of being able to read the message.

Lola Lawson uncrossed her shapely legs and bent to pick up the envelope. At the same instant, her brother Al crossed the room and took it from her hand, smoothing it out and tearing off the Canadian postage

stamp. It was the new RCMP thirty-cent red, commemorating a century of the Mounties always getting their man—or at least recording his telephone calls. Here was a sought-after addition to Al's stamp collection, which now numbered in the tens of thousands. One of these days he would have to buy an album.

"What news from back home?" Lola asked. She was feeling relaxed and happy since her husband had solved the mystery of a missing Guy Fawkes effigy and had recovered with it a swag of stolen diamonds out in Wimbledon.

"It's from Steve Linz," Lawson said. "He's working as a radio DJ in Montreal."

Al laughed as he tucked the stamp in his homemade alligator wallet, closing the jaws with a snap. "Steve as a radio man," he crowed. "It's a natural. He wouldn't even need a transmitter—just open a window in the studio." It was a reference to the penetrating voice of Linz, who had worked as a carnival barker when the Lawsons were touring America.

"Ignore him, Praw," Lola said. Her husband's nickname originated back in their touring days. One afternoon as Professor Harry Lawson completed a magical illusion with the voluptuous Lola, a Mason-Dixon master of ceremonies exhorted the audience with the cry, "Let's hear it for the Praw-fessah!" He was Praw Lawson from that day on. Lola was heavier now but she was still the sort of woman whose beauty could stop a train. "What does Steve have to say?"

"He says a hockey player has disappeared. Somebody named Bruno Massenet."

"Somebody? It's easy to see you don't follow hockey," Al said. "Bruno 'The Missile' Massenet is the greatest goal scorer the Montrealers have ever had. He's in the same class with Maurice 'The Rocket' Richard."

"And he's disappeared?" Lola asked.

"And I'm to find him." Lawson turned the page without looking at her. "Apparently Steve heard through the grapevine that I stopped making you vanish on stage and started a new career finding people who disappear in real life. He wants us to come to Montreal and have a go."

"Gee, I haven't been in Montreal in years," Al said.

"A record that looks to remain unbroken," Lawson told him. "Two plane fares are enough."

"That means I'll be alone for days," Al said.

"Go stay with Achilles Healey. He's been having a hard time with the

little woman—he can use all the help he can get.” Healey was a carnival strongman who had retired at the same time as the Lawsons. Now he was living in Battersea with a tiny wife who drank and put him through emotional hoops.

“Montreal in winter,” Lola said apprehensively. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“What’s a little snow?” Lawson said, eager to be off on his new case.

The Air Canada jet landed at Mirabel as nonchalantly as if a three-day blizzard had not just ended. The captain announced ground temperature as minus eighteen degrees with a wind-chill factor of forty below. Lawson stepped off the plane, inhaled deeply, and heard a click as the hairs in his nostrils congealed. “My sinuses just turned to marble,” he said.

Only Lola’s eyes showed between her fur hat and fur collar. “Run,” she said, “do not walk to that doorway.”

“Who can run? My knees just seized.”

After the formalities of Customs and Immigration, Lawson and Lola moved through into the reception area and saw Steve Linz waiting for them. He had not changed; he still looked the way movie heroes used to look thirty years ago—tall and smooth and glossy in a well pressed suit.

“Glad you could come, Praw,” he said after greetings had been exchanged. “You won’t regret it.”

“I already regret two airplane tickets,” Lawson said, “and I’m beginning to suffer prematurely from hotel-bill remorse. Your letter said nothing about expenses.”

“Don’t worry, there’s no hotel. You’re staying at Quincy Darby’s house in Pointe Claire. He’ll pick up the travel tab too.” Linz collected both suitcases and led the way. “Come on—we’ll talk in the car.”

He drove them through the glittering afternoon around the perimeter of Montreal to the suburb of Pointe Claire. “Quincy Darby owns the radio station I work for,” Linz explained. “He also owns an electronics plant that makes silicone chips for the computer industry.”

“How come he’s financing a search for the missing hockey player?”

“I suggested it the other day and he went along.” Linz drove through an industrial park on both sides of the highway. “Darby is also a director of the Montrealers.”

The last plant in the park, adjoining a residential area, was a modern building of pre-stressed concrete and olive-drab glass. A sign on the wire

fence said: DARBY SILICONE PRODUCTS—EFFICIENT CHIPS FOR INDUSTRY. Linz drove past the plant, turned into a driveway between ten-foot banks of newly ploughed snow, and approached the entrance of a house that was of half a mind to be a castle. There were spires and turrets, a row of chimney pots with smoke rising from them, and the front door was oak with a Gothic arch above it.

"It's nice of Mr. Darby to have us stay," Lola said, looking up at three floors of windows that looked back at her. "Are you sure there'll be room?"

They went inside and were de-coated and ushered into a small library where they found their host seated in a wing-back chair by a log fire with an open book on his knee. He had a martini-marinated face and his grey hair was combed sideways in strands you could count. He smiled and cleared his throat and Lawson expected him to say, "Good evening and welcome to Fireside Theater."

Instead he said, "Professor Harry Lawson, and the lovely Lola. This is a pleasure. I saw you on stage in Detroit years ago. You immersed the lady in a glass tank of water and produced her five seconds later, soaking wet, from a box on the other side of the stage."

Lawson remembered it well. Lola was at her peak in those days. She owned a skin-tight costume in crimson jersey and getting her wet in it had kept Lawson working the better theaters for years. "It's always nice to meet a fan," Lawson said. He shook hands as Linz made the unnecessary introductions. "I understand you've lost a hockey player," he continued.

"The backbone of the team," Darby said. "Bruno Massenet. He scored two goals against the Black Hawks in Chicago three weeks ago, came home on the plane, and hasn't been seen since."

"Has there been a ransom note?"

"No note, no phone call. If it was kidnapping, I'd be talking to the police." Darby got up and went to a table where he began pouring drinks. "I was at a loss till Steve here told me about you. I figured it was worth a try. Even if you don't find Bruno, at least I got to meet Mrs. Lawson."

What she considered to be excess weight had prompted Lola to quit the stage. But she liked a compliment from a man and she still smiled and moved like all the great charmers of history. As she took a drink from the old businessman she said, "My husband will find your hockey player, Mr. Darby."

"I want to believe anything you tell me, my dear. But I have a feeling Bruno Massenet has gone for good."

"Why are you so sure?" Lawson asked.

"Just a feeling. He was a volatile fellow, a ladies' man, a gambler. A regular loser in the game run by Wolf Pardo." Darby turned to the radio announcer. "Ask my friend Steve Linz."

"It's true," Linz said. "I go out quite a bit with Sue Pardo, Wolf's daughter, so I know what the old man is like. If Massenet made him mad, and he's capable of that, then the NHL goalkeepers can stop worrying about The Missile's slapshot."

Lawson took a taste of his drink. It was gin with the word vermouth spoken softly in its presence. "Then it is a police case," he said. "You suspect foul play."

"I also suspect I have about twenty years of life left to me," Darby said, "and I want to live it. So I'm not about to blow the whistle on Wolf Pardo. No—I think it's better if you work some of your magic. At least, that's what Steve thinks. It was his idea and he sold it to me."

Lawson gave the former carnival barker a baleful smile across the rim of his glass. "Thanks a lot, Steve," he said.

Linz missed the sarcasm. "That's O.K., Praw," he said. "I owed you a favor after the way you covered for me down in Alabama."

"The less said about that the better," Lawson mumbled.

They had more drinks and then a bite of early supper served in a baronial hall with a marble floor the size of the Forum freeze. All it lacked was the painted lines and a net at either end. "Is this where the team practices?" Lawson asked.

It was agreed during the meal that Lawson would drive in to Montreal with Steve and appear as a guest on the radio show that night. It was Steve's idea. "It can't hurt," he said. "It publicizes the search. It might even get through to Bruno if he's holed up somewhere."

"You mean he may be playing hard to get," Lola said. "Testing the team to see if it really cares."

"It's possible," Darby said dryly. "We only pay him a couple of hundred thousand. These days, that leaves an athlete feeling very insecure."

"I would also like to meet this Wolf Pardo individual," Lawson said. "Can you arrange it, Steve?"

"You don't really want to meet him," Linz said, "but I can arrange it. We'll do it after the show."

Lawson and Linz left Darby and Lola setting up the Monopoly game on a small table in front of the fireplace. "By the time you get back," he said, "my colleague from Sweden will be here. He's general manager of my subsidiary in Stockholm."

Lawson decided Darby was making it clear he would not be alone all evening with Lola. "Darby seems a decent man," he said as the car thundered along Upper Lachine Road heading for the glittering towers of Centre-ville.

"Decent but devious," Linz said.

"How devious?"

"He's a manipulator," Linz said. "We get paid, so it isn't exactly the slave trade. But announcers from his Montreal station keep finding themselves being transferred to North Bay, and the other way around. Ditto with hockey players. For all I know he works the same thing with his plant executives. He does it by calling you into his office and persuading you he's letting you be part of some marvelous deal."

"I know the type," Lawson said. It was not so different from his own style; on stage, with lights and props, he had been able to make people believe almost anything. "Now what is it you want from me in this interview?"

What Steve Linz wanted was a bit of sensationalism to boost his audience and impress his boss. Whether Bruno "The Missile" Massenet was ever found was immaterial. As long as an edgy Montreal population heard on the Linz show that he might be found, that was good enough.

In Prawn Lawson Linz had the right man for the interview. "No question I'll find Massenet," Lawson said on the air. "I expect I'll find him in the next few days." Lawson had learned years ago that confidence was everything.

"Can you explain how you plan to go ahead?"

"My procedures are confidential, of course. But tell me something—when do the Montrealers play their next home game?"

"Saturday night. Against Boston."

"Then here is my promise. I will produce the missing Missile at center ice at the Forum on Saturday night, just before the face-off."

Linz was impressed. "How about that, sports fans?" he said. "Remember, you heard it here on the Steve Linz show. And here is *my* promise. After Bruno Massenet has been found, I'll have Professor Harry Lawson on my show to explain how he did it. O.K., Prawn-fessah?"

"You got it."

Later, as they walked together along Ste. Catherine Street on their way to meet Wolf Pardo at the Mermaid Club, Linz said, "How come you're so far ahead with your investigation, Praw? You've only been in Montreal a few hours."

"Because it's so cold here," Lawson said. "I can't stand the temperature. Besides, I left Lola's brother Al in charge back in London. I have to finish this and get back before he turns the office into a pigeon loft."

"That doesn't make any sense, Praw."

"I know."

The Mermaid Club was one of several business enterprises operated by a syndicate of which Wolf Pardo was the head. The club featured disco dancing on a floor surrounded by glass tanks full of exotic fish. The fish had grown up with squids and Portuguese men-of-war but they had never seen any movement like what was happening on that dance floor.

As Lawson and Linz passed through on their way to the office, the current hit single was playing: three lads singing in falsetto harmony about night vapors. A middleweight in a banker's suit with a sweater under the jacket moved to block the office door, then stepped aside when he recognized the radio announcer. Linz couldn't help feeling proud of standing out even in these shoddy surroundings.

"It helps when you know the boss's daughter," he said.

Wolf Pardo turned out to be a beefy man in an immaculate silver suit. His shirt was white and lacy, his shoes gleaming patent leather. Lawson learned later that Wolf was a nickname and he saw the reason for it at first glance. Pardo had jet-black hair growing so far forward around his face that his craggy features were like the ruins of a city being taken over by the jungle. Crisp hairs crept up from his chest and appeared at the collar of his shirt. A thick fringe of black hair worked its way down from each cuff, matting the backs of his hands. He looked like Lon Chaney, Jr., in the penultimate stage of his Wolfman transition.

The young woman seated near him, obviously Pardo's daughter, was a classic example of how Nature can take ugly and make it beautiful just by altering the genetic balance. The girl's black hair, ebony eyes, and high cheekbones created an effect that was fascinating. At the same time, there was a suggestion of ferocity in her face that made it difficult to look away from her.

"Stevie, darling!" She got up and ran to Linz, embracing him, kissing him openly and passionately. As Pardo observed this greeting, his expression made it clear that his little girl could do no wrong.

"Hey, the famous investigator," Pardo said when he was introduced. "I heard you on the radio. You're gonna produce Massenet at the Forum on Saturday. Got any money to put on that?"

Lawson shook hands with the gambler. "I'm not a betting man," he said, "but I'll be there with Massenet."

Pardo rolled his eyes at his hangers-on who cluttered the walls of the room like bulky furniture in a warehouse. "This guy is ripe for the taking," he said. "There ain't gonna be no Bruno at the Forum, not this Saturday, not any Saturday."

"You seem very certain of that."

"I never speak unless I'm certain," Pardo said. "And I talk a lot."

"Daddy, be a better host," Sue scolded. She was sitting on Linz's knee now.

The visitors stayed for a drink—the Wolf's own invention, a savage mixture of Strega and Campari. They talked of Lawson's work and he described how he had managed to disappear inside a Guy Fawkes bonfire and come out alive. The crooks agreed he was a clever man but as Pardo saw them out of the office he said, "Ask the hockey club to give you a photograph of Massenet and take a good look at it. Because you're never going to see that face anywhere, I can promise you."

On the drive back to Pointe Claire, Linz said, "Did it sound to you as if Bruno has been killed and buried by those guys?"

"It sounded so much like it that I can't believe it." The car slowed for a line of empty dump trucks waiting their turn behind a snowblower eating up the drifts. The noise, the shape of the trucks, the lights like eyes on the yellow blower—the whole scene was like feeding time at the zoo on some alien planet.

"Did you say," Lawson asked, "that Massenet liked to place a bet?"

"On anything. Cards, horses, basketball—the arrival of the first robin in the Spring."

"What else can you tell me about him?"

"Besides the way he put the puck in the net? Well, he liked the girls and they liked him. Bruno fell in love three or four times a week." Linz gave the horn a toot and pulled out to pass the snowblower.

It was late enough when they arrived back at Quincy Darby's house that Linz was invited to stay the night. "I'd like to make this a celebration anyway," Darby said. "So much is happening. Ornj Sunqvist is here, the manager of my Stockholm subsidiary. And Professor Lawson just made a hell of a prediction on Steve's radio show. Not to mention the fact that Lola beat me at Monopoly and nobody ever does that. So let's make a night of it."

Sunqvist turned out to be a friendly fellow in his forties, a sharp dresser but gaunt, with a balding head and hollow cheeks like a spook in a Bergman film. He took over the record player, asked his host if he had any Gerry Mulligan, had to settle for the Dukes of Dixieland, then stood with his cigarette and his glass in the same hand, smiling and tapping a two-tone shoe.

"Are you here on business?" Lawson asked him, watching Lola jive with Steve to the near stupefaction of Quincy Darby.

"Yes. Always we cross the ocean, back and forth. It is a busy life, being a conglomerate."

"I believe you." Lawson sipped a beer, trying to wash away the after-taste of Wolf Pardo's concoction. "And are you a hockey fan?"

Sunqvist did an interesting thing. His hand shook so that he spilled his drink, drenching his cigarette. "Hockey? Our company sponsors a team in the semi-professional league. I watch it sometimes if I have a chance. Why do you ask?"

"Idle conversation."

The party went on until two o'clock, with Darby pleading even then for an extension. In their room, the Lawsons got ready for bed. "You must be mad," Lola said, "telling the world on the radio that you'll find Massenet by Saturday night."

"That's not madness," he said, "that's self-motivation." Lawson helped his wife with some clasps, then put his arms around her and pressed his cheek against hers from behind. "You looked good dancing down there. Come here often?"

"I saw you nattering with Mr. Sunqvist," Lola said. "He's a mysterious fellow."

"I'm not sure what to make of him: He pretends he doesn't know from hockey."

"Perhaps he doesn't."

"But Darby hired old Ornj to run his Swedish subsidiary. Darby's man

would either be a hockey buff or he would pretend to be. Yet Sunqvist says, Hockey? What hockey? Like I'd caught him wearing stolen skates."

"Well, I'm too tired to think about it." She watched herself yawn in the mirror.

"Poor kid. I'm getting you to bed." Lawson lowered his wife's garment from her shoulders.

"I'm so fat," she said. "It's awful."

"Lose one ounce and you'll have to answer to me."

A light sleeper at any time, Lawson heard footsteps in the hall outside the room. It was the cautious tread of somebody on strange territory. He raised his arm in the darkness and stared at the pale-green circle on his wrist. Half-past three. The prowler moved along the corridor and Lawson was prepared to let it go when he heard a thump and a curse. He rolled out of bed and went to the door, opened it, and looked outside. He saw somebody sitting on the top step of the flight leading down. He closed the door and moved down the corridor. It was Steve Linz. "What's up?"

"I cracked my head on something sharp. I think I'm bleeding."

Lawson found a light switch and turned it on. Above where Linz was sitting was a metal bracket designed to hold a torch. A secondary purpose would be wounding tall people. "Boy, are you bleeding," Lawson said. He knelt and examined the damage. "That's a five-stitcher if ever I saw one."

"Bloody hell," Linz said. "All I wanted was to find the john and then get back to sleep."

They roused Quincy Darby, who knew exactly what to do. The electronics plant next door was modern enough to have its own surgery and staff doctor. Darby summoned him by telephone. "Quicker than driving you to a hospital in Montreal," he said.

Lawson dressed quietly without waking Lola and accompanied his friend and their host along a path a distance of fifty yards to the plant's side entrance. The sky was like black diamonds, the path lined with snow shoveled above the height of a man, and the deep freeze had relaxed to a temperature of about zero degrees. They puffed frost as they hurried to the glass doors, Lawson holding a towel against Linz's head. "Feels like an early Spring," he said.

Dr. Keefer arrived promptly and began looking after the patient. "Not so bad," he said as he surveyed the wound. He was expensively dressed,

sleek, and slim, with the touch of grey in his hair that looks good on a man in his thirties. "We'll stitch that up in no time."

"Will I have a scar?" Linz asked.

"If you do, I'll perform a little plastic surgery," Keefer said.

Darby glared at his company doctor. "Just sew the man up," he said.

Keefer grinned as he washed his hands. "Sorry, boss," he said. "Does the size of my mouth bother you?"

"A couple of stitches wouldn't do any harm," Darby told him.

Lawson went looking for a men's room. He left the surgery and moved into a small anteroom. At its end were glass doors through which he saw the rectangular shapes of plant equipment. Nearer the surgery entrance was a wooden door he went to and tried to open. It was solidly locked. As he tried the door a second time, pushing harder, a hand took him by the shoulder and turned him around.

It was Darby. "What is it, Harry?" he asked. There was a flicker of tension in his eye.

"I'm just looking for the men's."

"Wrong door. You want to come back in the surgery and go this way."

Next day, Lola Lawson asked for the name of a good hairdresser. If she was going to appear on television at her husband's side on Saturday night she wanted to look her best. The maid gave her the name of a salon in Pointe Claire, just down the highway. "They'll come here if you want," she said. "They're used to coming here to style Mr. Darby."

"Thanks," Lola said, "but I'd rather get out."

Steve Linz was bandaged and in bed, so Lawson was able to borrow his car and drive Lola to the village. He spent the hour and a half of his wife's session sitting in a coffee shop, drinking and thinking. It was all fragments—but he felt something was there. Wolf Pardo's certainty that Massenet's face would not be seen again, the insistence of Ornj Sunqvist that he cared nothing for hockey, and the electric field surrounding Quincy Darby when he directed his visitor away from the locked door at the surgery.

Lawson talked about all this when he picked up Lola and they drove back to Darby's mansion. She was looking and smelling splendid.

"I agree it's mysterious," she said. "By the way, thanks for not waking me last night."

"No reason to."

She twisted the rear-view mirror so she could do little things to the new coiffure. "Something you might find interesting," she said. "Chips, the boy who did my hair, when he heard where we're staying, babbled on about this weird assignment he had at the surgery last week."

"What did he say?"

"He said he was called in to do a job on somebody who wasn't even awake. The head was bandaged except for the hair, and the body was covered too. With the length of hair these days he wasn't even sure if it was a man or a woman."

Lawson started to laugh. "That's just what I needed," he said. "Don't tell me what Chips did—let me tell you. He turned black hair into some other color."

"That's right," Lola said. "Blond. How did you know?"

"Because the Praw-fessah knows all."

The main difficulty now would be getting into the locked room. He would have to act quickly and with confidence, as he had done so often on stage. He would also need Steve Linz's car and all the charm Lola could bring to bear. Quickly, he explained his plan.

"Easy for me," she said. "Not so easy for you."

Lawson bypassed the big house and parked the car by the side entrance of the plant, taking the trouble to back and turn and point the front end toward the road. Inside, they went to the surgery and located Dr. Keefer, who was at his desk. Lawson got right to the point.

"Doctor," he said, "I have a message for Bruno Massenet. I've got to speak to him right now."

Keefer hesitated, then smiled. "I don't know what you're talking about. Massenet has disappeared."

"That's right. He was brought here and you've done a plastic-surgery job and they came and dyed his hair blond and now he's waiting to go off to Sweden and play hockey for Ornj Sunqvist's team."

Dr. Keefer was blinking.

"Quincy Darby told me all about it," Lawson pressed on. "I'm here to arrange for getting him out of the country—passport and all that. It's my specialty."

"Darby never told me," Keefer said.

"Darby never lets his teeth know what his hand is about to put into his mouth. Every bite comes as a surprise." Lawson glanced at his watch. "This is urgent. I've got to get Massenet's answers so I can have the right

information put on his papers. Unlock the door. Then you can ring Darby and check if you want."

This seemed safe enough. The doctor led his visitors down the hall and into the waiting room. He took out a ring of keys and unlocked the door. As Lawson entered the room Keefer said, "I'm going to call Darby and ask him."

"He'll admire you for it."

The door closed and as Keefer began to move back down the hall Lola gave a little cry.

"What's wrong?"

"I've got something in my eye."

"Let me have a look. I can't see anything here. Come into the surgery where I can put a light on it." They hurried into the bright room with its tile walls and clinical fixtures and sterile surfaces. With Lola there and turning it on, the place became like a seraglio.

"Now," Keefer said, aiming the light and putting his fingertips gently against Lola's cheeks. Her eyes looked into his at close range and the doctor felt as if somebody had left the anesthetic turned on. "I can't see anything—"

Lola steadied herself by placing a hand on his shoulder. "It hurts. I'm sure there's something."

Dr. Keefer kept looking.

The patient in the bed in the locked room had blond hair above bandages covering his face except for openings at the eyes, nostrils, and mouth. Lawson approached the bed and established a rapport with the furtive eyes. "Well, Bruno," he said, "I reckon you aren't supposed to speak just yet."

The head nodded.

"When do the bandages come off?"

The patient's hand rose and displayed two-fingers.

"Good. That's just right. Now, Bruno, I want you to trust me. I'm Professor Harry Lawson and I'm a specialist in sorting out the problems of Bruno Massenet. It would be a big mistake for you to vanish to Sweden the way I suspect they want you to. I don't know all the reasons behind this plot, but you can tell me later. The thing to do is get you out of here and into someplace quiet to wait for Saturday night. O.K.?"

The patient nodded again and when Lawson found clothes in the ward-

robe he dressed himself eagerly, like an active man who has been in bed too long.

The bandages were no problem in downtown Montreal. Massenet wore a hat pulled low and a scarf wrapped around his face—not an uncommon sight in sub-zero weather. They waited in the car outside Steve Linz's apartment on Lincoln Avenue, a couple of blocks from the Forum. When Linz arrived with Lola and led them into the building, he was on edge. "This is crazy, Praw," he said. "Dr. Keefer is going wild out there and Darby says you've cheated him. He says he's going to get Wolf Pardo to do you."

At the mention of the gangster's name, Bruno Massenet began to look as apprehensive as a man without a face can look. Lawson followed Linz and the others into the apartment, saying, "Relax. I'm going to work this out so everybody will be happy—Bruno, Darby, me—even you, Stevie. Now we need a few things for The Missile, starting with a pair of skates. Do you have an in at the Forum?"

"I know the guy who does the broadcasts," Linz said.

"O.K. I've written down what we need. Just ask silent Bruno to scribble in his shirt size and so forth, as indicated."

Linz studied the list. "You're mad," he said, but he was beginning to smile.

"I'm glad you're with me," Lawson said. "We hide out here till Saturday night. Then we take off the bandages, Bruno gets dressed, and we end up having a Harry Lawson spectacular at center ice, as advertised."

"Leaving a lot of mystified people," Lola said. "Me included."

"Remember, we have a date with Steve's Saturday-night radio show. That's when everything will be sorted out."

It was a quiet few days in the Linz apartment. There were no repercussions from Darby; he knew Lawson had snatched Massenet, but he couldn't bring in the police without explaining his own role in the original disappearance.

On Saturday morning, Lawson went with Steve when he visited the station to organize his music for the show that night. As they walked toward the studios he said, "Are you in a position to do a little tape recording without thousands of people standing around and listening?"

"We do it all the time," Linz said. "What's on your mind?"

"A little magic," Lawson said. "The fastening of a loose end. A finishing touch."

The announcer looked glum. "I'll be glad when tonight is over."

The Forum is always packed on a Saturday night, especially when the Boston Bruins are in town. But on this occasion, they doubled up in the standing room and there were crowds outside listening to the proceedings on loudspeakers.

It was meat and drink to Praw Lawson. After the pre-game warmup during which the players had been introduced—with no sign of The Missile—a red carpet was spread halfway across the rink and the public-address system announced the famous illusionist and private investigator, Harry Lawson. As the crowd cheered, he walked to center ice holding a microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "I promised to produce Bruno Massenet for you at this time. I said he would be here in his familiar number-nine Montrealers sweater." Lawson looked around and caught a glimpse of Quincy Darby frowning at him from his private box. He had managed to avoid the industrialist by arriving late. "I'm sorry to say I've been unable to do that."

The roar of the crowd was a spontaneous declaration of disappointment. Night after night on his program, Steve Linz had been singing the praises of the great Lawson, describing cases he had solved miraculously in the past. Now, at the moment of truth, he had confessed failure. The arena began to reverberate with the menacing rhythm of unison applause.

Lawson raised his hands for quiet. "Wait!" he shouted. "I said only that I've failed to produce Massenet in his hockey sweater. But the Missile is here. Come on, Bruno—show the people what they paid to see!"

The players of both teams were arranged roughly in formation at either end of the rink. The three officials in their dark trousers and vertically striped black-and-white shirts were clustered by the boards. The blond referee with the smooth, bland face skated forward and took a hockey stick from one of the players. He was carrying a puck which he dropped on the ice, and now he began to skate behind the Montrealers net, gathering speed, ragging the puck deftly as he approached center ice.

The crowd began to hum like a giant machine that had just been turned on. The robust figure in black-and-white skated right at a Boston forward who automatically made a poke-check movement. But Massenet deked

around him and approached the defense at full speed. The left defenseman was ready now, skated at the player coming in, but from somewhere Massenet found the speed to pass his man in three driving strides, the puck cradled on the stick held wide by a powerful wrist. Only the goalie was left, and he was dead. Massenet cut in front of the net, gave the goalie the puck, took it back, then flipped it over his diving body. The twine bulged, the light went on, and the Montreal Forum roof lifted a couple of inches into the freezing night air.

"How?" people kept asking Professor Harry Lawson.

"All shall be revealed on the Steve Linz show tonight," he said. Then he turned to Lola and said, "Did you make the phone calls? Will Pardo and his daughter be there? And Darby and Ornj Sunqvist? And Dr. Keefer?"

"They said they would."

"Then let's enjoy the game."

It was a fine hockey game. Bruno Massenet changed into his uniform and scored two goals in a 4-2 home victory. Lawson and Lola left early in order to grab a taxi and be at the studio before the others arrived. They found Steve Linz at the microphone in a state of nervous exhaustion. He had seen on television the spectacular at the Forum and was now wondering how they would come out of it alive.

"They must have had their reasons for grabbing Massenet and changing his appearance," he said. "Now you've spoiled their game. Where does that leave us?"

"Poised on a fine edge," Lawson said. "But it's better than being bored, eh?"

When the others arrived, including Massenet, Linz stopped playing records and introduced the fabulous Harry Lawson to his radio audience.

"This was an easy case for me," Lawson said into the microphone, "because I had days to think about it. Usually I have to work much faster. It was also a happy case, because there was no wickedness in it. Sometimes I'm called in to search for a missing person whose disappearance has to do with a crime. In this instance, fair-minded men were seeking a humane solution to a difficult problem."

Lola Lawson sat back in her chair and relaxed. She recognized the Praw's diplomatic delivery. It was going to be all right.

"First, I'll explain why Bruno Massenet disappeared." Lawson sat closer to the microphone and lowered his voice to a confidential rumble.

"Like many great athletes, Bruno is a betting man. Sometimes his enthusiasm for a gamble surpasses his ability to pay. As a result, Bruno got into financial difficulties with a local gambler who shall be nameless."

Wolf Pardo, sitting against the studio wall, began to bristle like a hedgehog. In the next chair, his daughter Sue edged away, not wanting to be caught in the blast when her father exploded.

"But despite the size of Massenet's debts, this public-spirited gambler refused to take action against The Missile. He knew that such a talented athlete is a gift to the world. But still the debts had to be paid, so a plan was devised by Mr. Quincy Darby."

"What did he come up with?" Linz asked, just to keep his voice audible on his own radio show.

"Darby hatched a scheme with the head of the Swedish subsidiary of his electronics firm. The Swedish company sponsors a hockey team in the Stockholm semi-pro league. It was decided that Bruno Massenet would go to Sweden to play for this team. The money they would offer to purchase him would go to pay his gambling debts."

"Two things," Linz said. "First—how do you know all this?"

"I've had a couple of days to talk to Massenet."

"Right. The other thing is—they had to change Bruno's appearance so he could play somewhere else."

"Exactly. So a very clever doctor named Keefer performed plastic surgery to change Massenet's appearance. This, plus tinted contact lenses to give him blue eyes and a dye job to make him blond, made it possible for Bruno Massenet to disappear. The idea was for him to play in the semi-pro league for a season and then move up to the Swedish National team. Bruno was satisfied. He was out from under his debts and would still play top-level hockey for good money." Lawson grinned at the hockey player sitting beside Lola. "And there would be all those lovely Swedish girls."

"But now you've told my audience about it," Linz said. "You've blown the whole deal. What happens now?"

"I'm happy to say that all parties have agreed to go back to square one. Mr. Sunqvist has given up his claims to Bruno Massenet. And our public-spirited gambler has agreed to waive all debts to let The Missile go on playing for the Montrealers."

Pardo's mouth fell open. He had something to say but, like many common people, he equated a radio studio with a cathedral and believed

he could not speak while the service was in progress.

Steve Linz could sense the impending explosion and decided it was time to close the microphone. "Well, there you have it," he said. "Thanks to the skill of Harry Lawson and the kindness and generosity of members of the local business and gambling community, we have our Missile back to stay. And now, here is some uninterrupted music." He pressed a switch setting a turntable in motion, closed the mike, and sat back in his swivel chair.

Wolf Pardo got to his feet, adding a couple of inches to his height. "What is this?" he growled. "I never waived any debts!"

"No," Lawson said. "But you will now."

"Who says?"

"Your daughter."

This surprised the gambler and threw him off balance. He glanced uneasily at the pretty girl with the determined face. "What's she got to do with it?"

"Sue is in love with Steve Linz, right? I've observed this couple together only once, in your office, but that's all it took to show me they make Romeo and Juliet look like Maggie and Jiggs. He thinks she's made of rich dark chocolate filled with dairy cream, and she believes that when he walks her way a thousand violins begin to play—as the late Errol Garner put it."

"All right, they love each other. So what?"

"So it would disturb little Susie if the Alabama State Police came here and collected Stevie Linz and took him back to answer charges having to do with funds missing from a Montgomery bank."

Lawson listened to the thunderstruck silence. Then he emphasized his point. "Breaking up big rocks on a chain gang may be all right for folk singers, but it's hell for radio announcers."

"That's an old rap, Praw," Steve said. "You covered for me when it happened. You wouldn't blow the whistle on me now—"

"I would if Mr. Pardo tries to put any more pressure on Bruno. I want these gambling debts canceled."

"They're canceled, they're canceled," Sue Pardo said. "Not another word, Daddy. We'll talk when we get home." She took her father's hand and drew him down beside her. Wolf Pardo sat there glowering, his fingernails lengthening, the dark hair creeping down his forehead as his nostrils enlarged and his lips disappeared.

Quincy Darby laughed and shook his head. "I figured you'd bring this off, Lawson," he said, "because I've seen you on stage. You always have something up your sleeve."

The Swedish businessman was shuffling his feet. "I have a problem," he said. "Important people in Stockholm have been promised this great player for our national team. I cannot just tell them he has changed his mind."

"You can tell them better than that," Lawson said. "Earlier today I received a telephone call from a man at the Czechoslovakian consulate. I was here at the studio and was able to have Steve make a recording of the conversation. They do this frequently for their phone-in programs." Lawson turned to Linz. "Could you play the tape, Steve?"

The announcer took a cassette from a shelf and pressed it into a slot in the console. The voices that issued from the speaker were interesting. Lawson's was level and clear, the Czech caller muffled on a somewhat noisy line. The Czech, whose name was Fiala, had heard that Lawson was in contact with Bruno Massenet. He wanted the hockey player to be told that generous privileges were waiting for him in Prague if he would slip behind the Iron Curtain soon after he arrived in Sweden. Lawson agreed to have The Missile call the consulate.

"So you see," he said when the tape ended, "there's no way you were ever going to keep Massenet anyway, Mr. Sunqvist. Not only would you lose him, but he would be playing *against* Sweden in the European championships."

Sunqvist looked both anxious and relieved. "I have no problem," he said. "I can tell my principals we are much better off with Massenet in the NHL."

Everybody left the studio except for Sue Pardo, who stayed to keep Steve company during the rest of his broadcast. In the corridor beyond the triple-glass windows, Darby said to Lawson, "I'm not sure I'm glad you came here, Professor. But at least we keep The Missile in Montreal. And I did get to meet your lovely wife."

"The pleasure was ours," Lola said.

When they were alone, she said to her husband, "Lucky that phone call happened to come in from the Czech consulate."

"Luckier than that," Lawson said. "What if Steve Linz hadn't been able to do such a good Czech accent?"

They were passing through reception, both laughing, when the switchboard operator waved a hand. "Mr. Lawson, a call for you. It's from London. Take the phone on the desk."

Lawson lifted the receiver and heard the familiar voice of Al Batross, Lola's brother. "Glad I got you, Praw. How goes the case?"

"Successfully completed."

"Good. Because we've got problems over here. You know that peppery little toss-pot Achilles Healey is married to? Well, she's disappeared. And the big man is getting ready to take down a few buildings."

Outside, looking for a taxi, Lawson said to Lola, "So much for the possibility of our hanging around for Christmas in Montreal. Looks like we'll spend it in London."

"What makes you think we'll find the woman in London?" Lola said. "She could be anywhere."

They found a taxi and as it pulled away, Praw Lawson had that faraway look in his eye.

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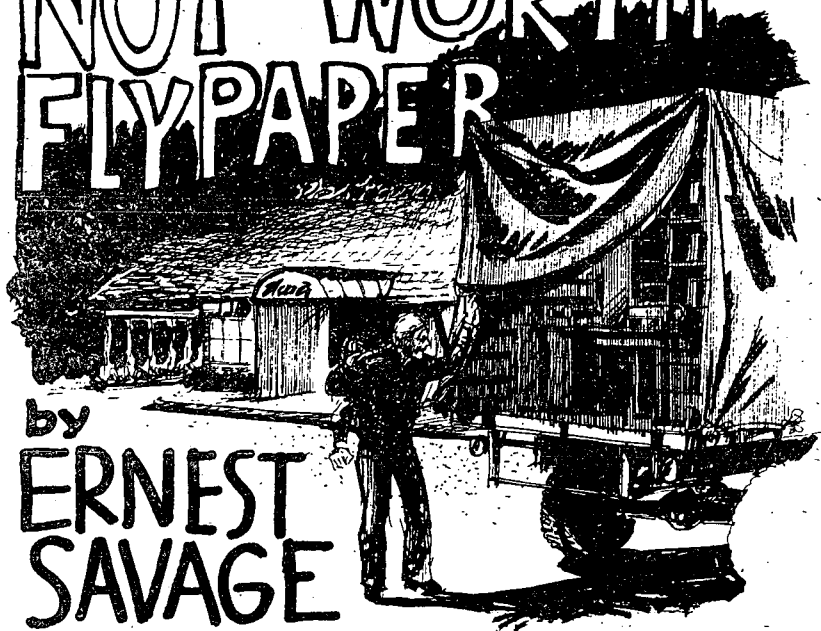
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Emma had been ripped off . . .

NOT WORTH FLYPAPER

by
**ERNEST
SAVAGE**



Abe Kitchener got out of Charley Helms' pickup truck in front of his house at about five o'clock that Saturday afternoon. He went to the back of the truck, opened the door of the camper shell, and got out his fishing gear and bedroll and the plastic ice chest nearly full of cleaned trout. Then he closed the camper-shell door, slammed it with the flat of his hand as a signal, and watched Charley take off for his place a quarter of a mile farther up the road. It had been a good trip.

Abe started down his long gravel drive, then stopped suddenly, went back, and read the cardboard sign nailed to his gatepost. On it was printed in brown crayon: FOR SALE—ONE GOOD SEWING MACHINE IN FINE SHAPE. \$90.00

"What the hell," Abe said aloud, and continued down the drive to the small tidy house he and his wife could barely afford any more.

Emma was in the kitchen preparing supper. Abe said, "What the hell is that sign out there for—about the sewing machine?"

"Oh!" Emma said, and turned to face him. "I forgot to take it down."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning I sold the machine an hour ago."

"What in hell for?" Abe said. He moved a vase of roses to a corner of the kitchen table and put his stuff down in the cleared space.

"On account of," Emma said stiffly, "I got my pride. In fact, I got *your* pride too, since you got none of your own."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning, look at that bedroll. I promised myself I wasn't gonna let you out of the house again with that ratty old thing. Now I can get you a new one. Besides, you need a new reel too."

"What I need, Mrs. Kitchener, is a new shirt. You haven't made me a new shirt in two years. What I need is about five new shirts. Now who's gonna make 'em?"

"I'll get you a new shirt too—at the Thrift Shop."

"Welfare!"

"It's not welfare. You have to buy them."

"Fifty cents apiece, for God's sake! What kind of a shirt can you get for fifty cents?"

Emma turned back to the sink and picked up a potato to peel. It was a done thing. He could storm at her all he liked, but it was a done thing. Now, by heaven, she'd get him a new bedroll at *least* as good as Charley Helms' and maybe better. She set her narrow shoulders against him and he sat down at the table, hard.

"Well, damn it, how much did you get for it?" he said.

She shrugged. "Eighty dollars."

"The sign said ninety."

"They dickered me down."

"Who did?"

"The people that bought it—who else do you think?"

"Cash money?"

"A check."

"Let me see it."

"It's right there under your nose if you'd look."

And so it was, one corner sticking out from under the stained, patched bedroll he'd been using for twenty years. He looked at it scornfully. It was drawn on one of the two local banks. A Mr. and Mrs. Perkins, with a local address and phone number printed under the name. "Mrs. Kitchener," he said with husbandly force; "this bedroll will last as long as I last and I can make that reel do tricks a new reel could *never* be taught to do."

"It's a done thing."

"I want it *undone*." He stood up. "How come you didn't tell me you was gonna sell the machine? You wait till my back's turned and then you do an unwifely thing. You been sewing all your life. You've sewed every two pieces of cloth together in this house, except maybe my pants and underwear."

"The Thrift Shop's got all that stuff," she said. "You're not goin' out of this house again with that verminous old bedroll. Charley Helms ought to be ashamed to be seen with you—even up in the mountains. That's final, Abe."

"Final, hell!" He got up and stomped out the kitchen door and across his back yard to the Evans place. When they had to, the Kitcheners used the Evanses' phone, which the Evanses didn't mind as long as it was local. Mrs. Kitchener gave Mrs. Evans flowers and vegetables from her garden and it was a fair exchange. They were good neighbors to each other, each fighting the Social Security fight—and giving ground slowly.

Abe dialed the number on the check and got this female voice telling him he'd made a mistake, to dial again. He did and got the same female voice saying the same thing.

He hung up, thanked Mrs. Evans, told her he'd bring her a couple of fish, and went home.

He said nothing to his wife. She had a scalloped-potato casserole ready for the oven, with maybe a bit of ham in there for kicks. Tomorrow they'd have a good fish dinner.

"Where you plannin' to go?" she said, sensing he was off somewhere.

"None o' your damn business," he said.

"You're not goin' out lookin' like that," she said.

"Well, if I had a decent shirt," he said, "I'd put it on—but it looks like I'll never have a decent shirt again."

"You've got the green one," she said, but he'd gone out the front door and around to the carport where the '67 VW bug was parked. He had the check with him. He was feeling mean, double mean.

The address on the check said 743 Ponderosa Drive, one of the better addresses in town, but when he got there 743 didn't exist, unless a patch of pine trees is a place to live. He knew it. He'd known the minute the woman on the phone told him the phone number didn't exist either. He went back home triple mean, but got himself under control before he entered the house. His stuff wasn't on the table any longer. The dinner mats and cutlery were there instead, the roses back where they'd been.

"You caught twenty-three fish," she said. "That's three over the limit no matter how you divvy up the two days you was gone. One of these times you're gonna get caught by the game warden, and then what?"

"What did this guy look like?" he said.

"What guy?"

"The guy that bought the machine."

"She bought it. He stood out by the truck."

"What did the truck look like?"

"How would I know what the truck looked like? It was a truck. Go wash your filthy hands. This casserole'll be ready in five minutes."

"Was it green—brown—red? What color was it?"

"It was green. Why?"

"A pickup, a flatbed, what?"

"It was a stakeback, with a tarpaulin over the top. Why, Abe?" She turned away from making the salad and faced him.

"Because you got ripped off, Mrs. Kitchener. This check ain't worth flypaper!" He waved it at her.

He was mad—at her, at inflation, at the President, at the oil companies, at the whole shooting match. He'd retired three years ago and bought this tidy little house, and he figured he had enough to live like a human being for the rest of his days, he and Emma. What with fishing and gardening and her sewing most of the clothes they needed, they could make it. Who needed more? But who could live on less? He was mad. "What," he said, "did *she* look like?"

"Oh, my," Emma said. "She was young—thirty maybe—a good-looking

woman with long dark hair, dark eyes, good teeth. She had on a pink sort of shirt and blue pants—jeans.”

“And the guy?”

“He had a lot of hair, Abe. A beard. Dark. He had on blue jeans too, and a blue shirt, I think. Abe—”

“Keep the casserole,” he said, “on hold.”

He thought he might go get Charley Helms, the retired deputy sheriff and his friend and fishing buddy, but then he thought he wouldn't. He was already outside again, in the bug. He thought he would go and look for the truck before it got dark. He was seething mad now. Rip off an old lady—what kind of dirty rats would do a thing like that? He loved Emma as much as he loved life itself—more, probably. It wasn't the sewing machine now, or the shirts he'd never have. It was something more fundamental, a principle. Do that to an old lady, would they? His old lady? He started the bug, backed out of the drive like a teenager, and took off for Ridge Road, the artery through town leading from the valley down below to the mountains, thinking: a green stakeback with a tarp over the top.

He saw it when he was driving past the Fisherman's Paradise Motel on Lower Ridge Road. The Fisherman's Paradise was new and big, a restaurant and car-service center along with a couple of hundred rooms, and a place he would normally shun. It was what he'd come up here to get away from, all that big-city stuff. But now he drove by twice to make sure and then pulled into the parking lot of the motel.

The truck was parked in front of Room 33. Cautiously, Abe angled into the nearest open slot and got out to inspect it. The tarp was tightly roped over the top and halfway down the sides but, in the waning light of day, by peering through the interstices of the tailgate, he could see Emma's machine clearly. Along with a lot of other stuff, including a couple more sewing machines. The tailgate of the truck was firmly roped down but not locked. Abe whistled softly. In three minutes he could get in there and get the machine, but he didn't have the guts of a thief. He looked at the license plate—NBY 882—then looked again more closely and saw it wasn't NBY 882, but NRY 682. Streaks of mud had been artfully arranged to fool the casual eye. “Gypsies!” he muttered aloud.

He glanced out at the street in case there might be a passing county cop's car, but of course there wasn't. Then on second thought he was glad there wasn't. If he blew the whistle on this outfit, Emma's sewing machine

would be tied up as evidence for months, possibly years, before the case came to trial. And at sixty-eight you don't think in terms of years, you think in terms of now—tomorrow, at the latest.

Abe went back to his car and got in, obliquely watching the door of Room 33, the lights just coming on behind its drawn front-window drapes. As he sat there, his fingers drumming nervously on the wheel, an idea formed in his mind. Then the door to Room 33 opened, and the couple Emma had described came out and headed down the walk to the restaurant. Abe let some breath loose, backed out of the slot, and tore home as fast as he could.

"Where you been?" Emma snapped. "The casserole's cold already."

"Stick it back in the oven," Abe said. "Where's our old checkbook?"

"What old checkbook?"

"How many old checkbooks we got, for God's sake?" Abe was rummaging through the drawers of Emma's desk just inside the small cozy living room and found it even as he spoke. A dozen or so checks were left, though they'd canceled their account last year because they couldn't afford the charges. It was the same bank as the gypsies used.

Abe trotted into the bedroom off the living room, changed his filthy fishing pants for a fresh pair of chinos, and put on the good green shirt. In the bathroom he studied himself in the mirror. He didn't figure he had time to shave, but he wet and slicked down his hair before he trotted back outside and got in the bug. Emma just stared at him.

They were having coffee when he got there, their used dinner dishes shoved aside. Abe sidled up to the table tentatively, a shy grin he'd been practicing all the way from home itching like a wire mask on his face. He cleared his throat, country-bumpkin style. "You the party with the truck outside?" he said. "The stakeback?"

The man looked up, cold-eyed. "So?"

The woman lit a cigarette and looked up, cold-eyed too. She was pretty in a hard sort of way.

"I seen," Abe said, "a sewing machine in there. Mahogany case. I been lookin' for one for my wife—you know, cheap."

"Try the garage sales," the girl said.

"I did. I been out all afternoon lookin' for one, but everywhere I went somebody'd beat me to it. There ain't none left in town."

"How much'll you give for it?" the man said.

"Well—does it work O.K.?" Abe said. "I mean what condition is it in?"

"Perfect," the girl said.

Abe felt generous. "Well, in that case, how about a hundred?"

"Cash?"

"Huh?" Abe sat down on the edge of the seat next to the girl. She moved fastidiously; maybe he still smelled a little of fish. "I don't carry that much cash with me, but I'll write you a check."

"How much cash you got?" the man said.

"I don't know—maybe fifteen bucks—but what's the matter with a check?" He pulled the book from the pocket of his green shirt and laid it out on the table, open, in full view.

"We don't take checks," the girl said.

Small damn wonder, Abe thought savagely. He knew what they did. He'd read about people like them. They printed up a bunch of fake checks on small-town banks like his and then spent Saturday and Sunday, when the banks were closed, picking up as much stuff as they could load in the truck. A week later it showed up in a flea market in L.A. or some such place.

He kept the vapid smile glued to his face.

"Look, it's a good check," he said. "I got my driver's license, Social Security card, anything else you might like to look at."

"No sale," the girl said. "I told you. We don't take checks."

No, you just give them, Abe thought bitterly. He'd have to blow the whistle on them after all, it looked like. He stood up and the man edged a little aggressively on his seat.

"How come," he said, "you happened to look in our truck?"

"The last party I tried to buy a machine from described it to me," Abe said through muscle-aching jaws. "And then I happened to see it." He'd been ready for the question.

"What party?"

"This sweet little old lady over on Thomas Street. She had this sign on her gatepost."

The man settled back and he and the woman looked at each other and grinned.

"Well, O.K., I guess," Abe said and walked out of the place trailing steam, another idea cooking rapidly in the heat of his mind.

He got in the bug and tore out of the place. He drove back to Thomas Street, but went past his house without slowing another quarter mile to

Charley Helms', throwing gravel as he spun into Charley's drive. Charley's house was twice the size of Abe's, but Charley could afford it. He'd retired a year ago after forty years on the county force and had a nice fat pension deal plus hospitalization and everything else.

Charley hated it. They'd made him quit at sixty-five even though he figured he had ten good years left in him. But what he hated most was life with Shirley. Life with Shirley had been O.K. as long as all they had to do was eat a couple of quick meals together every day and sleep under the same roof, if not in the same bed. But *all* day, *every* day! Charley hardly talked about much else when he and Abe were off fishing together. Charley wanted to go back to work—yearned to go back to work.

Shirley wasn't there. That was a blessing. Her car was gone from the garage, Charley's dusty pickup the only vehicle in sight, and Abe banged unceremoniously on the front door, opened it, and walked in. Charley was watching TV, a beer in his hand.

"Go 'get your uniform on," Abe said. "We got police work to do."

"What're you talking about?" Charley said.

Abe told him the whole deal and watched the old war horse in Charley snort a few times in excitement. "Them dirty bastards," he growled, but he didn't get up.

"Gypsies," Abe said. "Get your uniform on, Charley."

"Hell, Abe, I can't do that. I got no authority no more."

"You let me get Emma's machine out of that truck and then you arrest them and you'll be a local hero. They must have twenty things in that truck they picked up today and they'll get twenty more tomorrow. All swiped—all bought with rubber checks. They'll elect you mayor, for God's sake."

"You think so?" Charley mused.

"I know so!" Besides, Abe thought, you owe me a favor. Charley couldn't catch a fish in his own bathtub without a two-handed net unless Abe showed him how. But Abe didn't say that, he just let the idea work through Charley's sluggish mind. "Get your uniform on," Abe said. "We'll take your truck on accounta I can't get the machine in the bug. Let's go, Charley."

It was a good thing it was completely dark when they got back down to the Fisherman's Paradise Motel because Charley's uniform was a comedy. He'd put on twenty pounds since his retirement. He couldn't get

the top button of his pants buttoned and his shirt looked like a sail in a gale-force wind.

"Just suck up your gut," Abe told him on the way down. "The hat and the shoulder patch'll do the trick. Nobody looks twice at a cop after they see his hat."

"I got no badge," Charley said. "I got no gun. I feel naked."

"Well, you damn well don't look naked. Naked you'd bring the world to a halt. Relax."

Abe, who was driving the truck because Charley couldn't work his legs right in the tight pants, pulled the pickup in behind the stakeback and squealed to a halt. He figured time was of the essence. He just wanted Charley to stand around outside to make the thing look official, but Charley was almost too embarrassed and scared, the lure of the mayoralty, or even his old job back, vanished. But he got out and stood there like Abe told him to, with his back turned to the busy flow of traffic on Ridge Road. Thank God it's dark, he thought, and pawed nervously at the empty holster at his side. "Hurry!" he said huskily.

Abe *was* hurrying, but the going was harder than he'd expected. The gypsy had tied a special kind of thieves' knot on the rope drawn through the tie-holes on the bed of the truck and the stout manila hemp wouldn't give to his fingers. He turned to Charley. "You didn't bring a knife, did you?"

"I couldn't get a sheet of paper in these goddamn pants," Charley hissed. "No, I didn't bring a knife! Get on with it!"

Abe worked away, sweating, and finally broke one of the knots. The other two were a little easier and in maybe eight minutes all told he was inside the truck with Emma's machine in his hands. He bucked it to the back of the truck and told Charley to come and get it, but Charley was facing Ridge Road now, watching the traffic, watching a county patrol car drift along the slow lane, the driver's face as big and white and round as the moon—and looking right at him.

"Oh, boy!" Charley breathed and watched the county car proceed to the next corner, turn, and drift back. "Oh, boy!" he repeated, and didn't hear Abe clambering around behind him as he transferred the heavy machine from the gypsies' truck to Charley's.

Abe tapped Charley on the shoulder and said, "Let's go," but Charley was like stone, and then the county car swung into the parking lot and the two of them were suddenly stage center in a flood of light. Charley

lifted the hat off his head and raised the sleeve of his right forearm to wipe sweat off his drenched brow. The underarm of the sleeve ripped like an old sheet.

Abe trotted forward to the driver's side of the county car, which had stopped fifteen feet away, and told the driver, who he saw at once was Bill Nettles, Charley's sister's boy, to turn the bleeding light off, which Bill did. Bill was big and not too fast, on foot or anyway else. "Is that Uncle Charley," he said, "or is it Halloween already?" He got out slowly, a considerable stomach swelling the front of his uniform shirt—it was a family trait.

"You're just in time," Abe said.

"For what?"

"An important arrest."

"Who—Uncle Charley?"

"No. Lemme tell you," Abe said, and he did, in clear simple terms, most of which he had to repeat. Bill, he noted, was getting excited as the story unfolded. He'd been on the county force for four years and had done nothing more notable than issue traffic tickets and strong-arm a few Saturday-night drunks. It was an important case, by God!

"But what's Uncle Charley doin' in uniform?" he said. Charley had moved over to the side of his truck and was lounging there, or leaning there—or maybe dying there.

Abe told him, lying a little as he went, and then told Bill, whom Charley had trained before he retired, that all he had to do was get a search warrant for the truck and then go arrest the gypsies in Room 33 for ripping off half the town. He'd be a hero, Abe added.

"But I've got to have a reason to get a search warrant, don't I? I mean I can't just go—"

"Look at that license plate," Abe said. "What number is it?"

Bill read the plate aloud, standing five feet away. "NBY 882."

"Look again," Abe said, and Bill squatted down and looked.

"They defaced it," he said.

"And that's against the law, ain't it?"

"It sure is!" Bill straightened up, on firmer ground now. "What I'll do," he said, "is I'll stay right here and radio the base to get a warrant. Meanwhile you and Uncle Charley can stand by as—"

"No, no!" Abe whispered. "Charley and I'll just take off quietlike and then the whole pie is yours." Bill had gone fishing with Abe and Charley

a few times and was no better, at catching a fish, than Charley was. The thing is, you've got to be smarter than the fish.

"Why share it with us?" Abe added confidentially. "You wanna get ahead on the force, don't you?"

"You bet I do!"

"O.K. then, let's do it that way."

"O.K.," Bill said, and then his big fleshy face broke into its first smile.

"Hey, Abe—thanks, huh?"

"Nothin' to it," Abe said.

Charley was slumped down in the passenger seat of the truck, his cop's hat in his lap, out of sight. He had a kind of body odor about him now, but Abe didn't mind. Abe was driving carefully because he hadn't had time to rope Emma's sewing machine down in the camper shell. He wasn't in a hurry, except his stomach was rumbling away like thunder in the hills.

Charley stirred, straightened a little, and mumbled something Abe couldn't make out.

"What?"

"I said I won't get no credit now."

"Well, it's in the family anyway," Abe said. "Relax, Charley."

Abe stopped the truck in front of his place long enough to get out, get Emma's machine from the back, and carry it up to the front porch. Then he drove Charley home, got in the bug, and whipped back home.

"What's that?" Emma said. He'd put the sewing machine smack dab in the middle of the kitchen floor. She'd just finished the dishes.

"What's it look like?"

"I know what it is, but what's it doin' here?"

"I got it back from the gypsies that swiped it from you," Abe said. He sat down at the kitchen table, tired now.

Emma laid a hand on the solid mahogany top of the machine as though welcoming an old friend. She almost cried, but didn't. She hadn't cried in years. "I'm glad," she said. She lifted the lid and laid it back on the arm that automatically came out to support it, and then she patted the metal sewing head gently, as though to say, "Forgive me." It had been a silly, impetuous thing to do, but she'd had her reasons, and not such dumb ones either. The machine looked O.K. to her practiced eye, un-

touched. Then she pulled open the little thread drawer and straightened up with a gasp.

Abe shot to his feet. "What's the matter?"

She didn't answer. She reached delicately into the small drawer and pulled out a long rope of pearls, almost two yards of it it looked like.

Abe said, "Well, I'll be damned!" but Emma was silent, her eyes shining. She cupped the mass of pearls in both hands and walked dreamily to the bathroom, followed by Abe. "They hooked 'em from someone after they left here," he said. "They ain't real, are they?"

Emma didn't answer. She'd never seen anything like them in her life, but she knew just what to do with them, coiling them around her neck two or three times and arranging them across her spare old breast.

"They're beautiful," she said softly, watching herself in the medicine-chest mirror, her eyes shining. "I've never seen anything so beautiful in all my life!" She felt beautiful herself; felt years fall away from her back, felt new energy flow through her, felt creative, bursting with bright new ideas. She turned and looked at Abe, starry-eyed.

"You know what?" she said. "I can sew you a new sleeping bag. The thought never crossed my mind before."

"How about dishing up some food," he said, "before you do that?"

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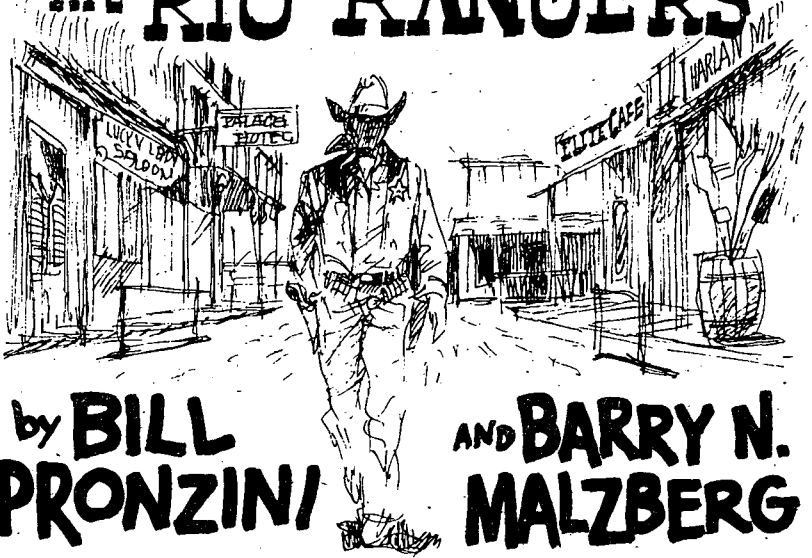
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The midday sun glinted off the sheriff's badge

BLAZING GUNS OF THE RIO RANGERS



by **BILL
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AND **BARRY N.
MALZBERG**

With his hands resting on his twin Colt Peacemakers, the Brazos Kid walked at a slow measured pace along Main Street. The brassy midday sun glinted off the sheriff's star pinned to his vest, made the false-fronted buildings stand out in sharp relief against the sky. Heat mirage shimmered beyond the livery stable in the next block, half obscuring the road that led up into the foothills west of town.

The Kid stopped opposite the Lucky Lady Saloon and stood hip-shot,

listening to the silence. Nothing moved anywhere ahead of him or around him. There were no horses tied to the hitchrails, no wagons or buckboards, no townspeople making their way along the plank sidewalks. But he could feel the nervous eyes of the men, the frightened eyes of the women watching him from behind the closed doors and shuttered windows.

Waiting, all of them—just as he was.

Waiting for what he had come to call all outlaws: the Rio Rangers.

Sweat trickled down the Kid's forehead; he wiped it away with his bandanna, smearing the dust-cake on his lean, sun-weathered face. His mouth tasted dry and dusty, like the street itself, and he thought of pushing in through the saloon's batwings and taking a shot of rye. But whiskey dulled a man's thoughts, turned his reflexes slow; handling a gun with whiskey in your belly would buy you a one-way ticket to Boot Hill if you were going up against a band of Rio Rangers.

He reached into his shirt pocket instead, took out the makings, and rolled a cigarette with his left hand. He scratched a match into flame on the sole of his boot. His right hand never moved on the butt of the one Peacemaker in its hand-tooled Mexican holster.

How many of them would there be? he wondered. Four, maybe—that was how many he'd been told there were this morning when he'd got back into town. Four masked Rio Rangers in dusters bursting into the Cattlemen's and Merchants' Bank at four o'clock yesterday afternoon, demanding all the money and shooting down the bank director, Fred Simmons, in cold blood when he wouldn't open the safe. But there might be more in the gang than that, others who'd waited outside or back at whatever hideout they had in the foothills. You just never knew how many of their blazing guns you might have to face when the showdown came.

Not that it mattered much, the Kid thought, and a wry smile curved the corners of his mouth. He'd faced them many times before, in numbers from two to twenty, in towns like this one in half a dozen states and territories throughout the West, with or without a star pinned to his vest. And when the showdowns were over, it was always the Rio Rangers who lay face down in the dust; always the Brazos Kid who lived on to fight again.

No, it didn't matter how many of them there were. All that mattered was that they would be back; it was only a question of time. They would

be back because they hadn't got the money from the bank; they had murdered Fred Simmons before he opened the safe, and no one else knew the combination. They were stupid, just as all Rio Rangers were stupid. That was another reason why they would be back—and why they would get theirs in the end.

When they came, he would be ready for them.

The Kid blew smoke into the hot still air and then started walking again, thinking about Fred Simmons. Simmons had been a bossy, fussy man; like so many bank directors, he'd thought that the money other men entrusted to him gave him power over those men. He'd been demanding, high and mighty, and had treated the Kid with a kind of rough-edged contempt. The Kid knew that Simmons thought of him as a drifter, a fiddlefoot without roots who was little more than a servant to higher-placed citizens.

There had been times, looking at the fat middle-aged director, watching him wipe his streaming face with a handkerchief and listening to him give orders on how to protect the bank, that he'd disliked Simmons with a passion. But that was all past now—the contempt, the demands, the orders. Simmons was dead, killed while the Kid was out protecting others in the territory, two small ranchers who had lost twenty head of cattle to rustlers. Simmons was dead, and it was up to the Kid to avenge him and bring his killers to justice.

He moved on past Harlan's Mercantile, the Elite Café, the Palace Hotel. There was still no sound, nothing stirring in the thick, pulsing heat. It was as if the town itself was holding its breath now, waiting.

On past the Jarvis Funeral Parlor, the blacksmith's shop, his own office at the jail; heading toward the hostler's. The Kid knew just what an imposing figure he cut, moving along that dusty, deserted street: tall, with long legs and an easy Texas stride; strong, tough, leaned-down to sinew and bone. Men would stand aside when he passed them and lift their hats in respect. Women would smile at him and touch him with their eyes, longingly.

It was good to feel that kind of respect, the Kid thought, even though there was a kind of sadness to it: when the showdown was over, it would be impossible for him to stay. There had been a hundred towns over the years, and always when the showdowns were over it was time to move on, to abandon the towns that he'd saved, to seek others in need of justice.

You had your job to do and you did it.

Sometimes, late at night, he would wake up in a strange bed or alongside a strange trail and think of what might have been. An end to this rootless roaming throughout the West; an end to the gunfights and the marauding bands of Rio Rangers. The love of a good woman, children, a small ranch on decent grazing land. . .

Something moved in the alley between the blacksmith's shop and the livery.

A shadow, then a second shadow.

The Kid tensed, pushing reflections from his mind, alert to the sudden aura of danger. He slowed to an easy, deceptive walk and tossed his cigarette away, let both palms rest loosely on the butts of his Peacemakers. Squinted through the hard glare of the sunlight.

More movement inside the alley, and over on the far side of the street, behind Bennett's Feed and Grain Store. Furtive sounds reached his ears: the soft sliding of boots in the dust, the faint thump of an arm or hand or leg against wood.

The Rio Rangers.

Usually they came openly, swinging down Main Street to meet him for the showdown, their horses tethered at the edge of town, their weapons already drawn. But this time they had come in like night creatures, hidden, slinking in the shadows.

Well, it didn't matter.

The time had come—again—and it just didn't matter.

"Hold it right there, Shelton!" a voice boomed suddenly from the alley. *"Don't take another step!"*

The Kid dipped into a half crouch, poising for the draw. Shelton, he thought, and felt himself scowling.

How did they know his real name?

"We've got you surrounded!" the voice shouted. *"Raise your hands over your head!"*

There was something about that voice, the odd thunderous tone of it, as if it were coming through a megaphone, that made the Kid feel uneasy. More than uneasy—strange, suddenly lightheaded. The sun-baked street, the false-fronted buildings, seemed to shift in and out of focus, to take on new and different dimensions. Sunstroke, he thought. I been standing out here in the heat too long.

But it wasn't sunstroke. . .

One of the shadows in the alley ahead shifted into view—his first clear glimpse of the enemy. No Levis and cotton shirt and trail-dirty duster. No mask, no Stetson hat, no guns thong-tied low on both hips. A blue uniform. A Rio Ranger in a strange blue uniform and blue helmet, carrying a strange rifle across his chest.

The Kid looked around, blinking, confused. And saw that the buildings didn't just have false fronts; they had false *backs* too, and no backs at all on some of them, just a latticework of wooden supports like sets in a play—sets in a *movie*. Movie sets, TV-show sets on the back lot at Mammoth Pictures. A dozen movies, a hundred TV shows, all starring Roy Shelton as the Brazos Kid, the Pecos Kid, Billy the Kid. . .

Fred Simmons, the director, director and producer, always telling him what to do, shouting at him, never treating him like the hero he was—wouldn't open his safe, wouldn't give him the money he needed to pay his gambling debts—and so he'd faced Simmons down in the street like any other Rio Ranger, right there in the street in front of the director's house . . . coming here then, coming back to town to wait for the posse. . .

"Shelton!" the voice in the alley shouted. "*Raise your hands over your head! Don't make us open fire on you!*"

There was a jolting sensation inside the Kid's mind; the false-fronted buildings, the sun-blasted street settled back into familiar focus. Then, ahead, he could see four, five, six of the blue-uniformed Rio Rangers fanning out toward him, keeping to cover.

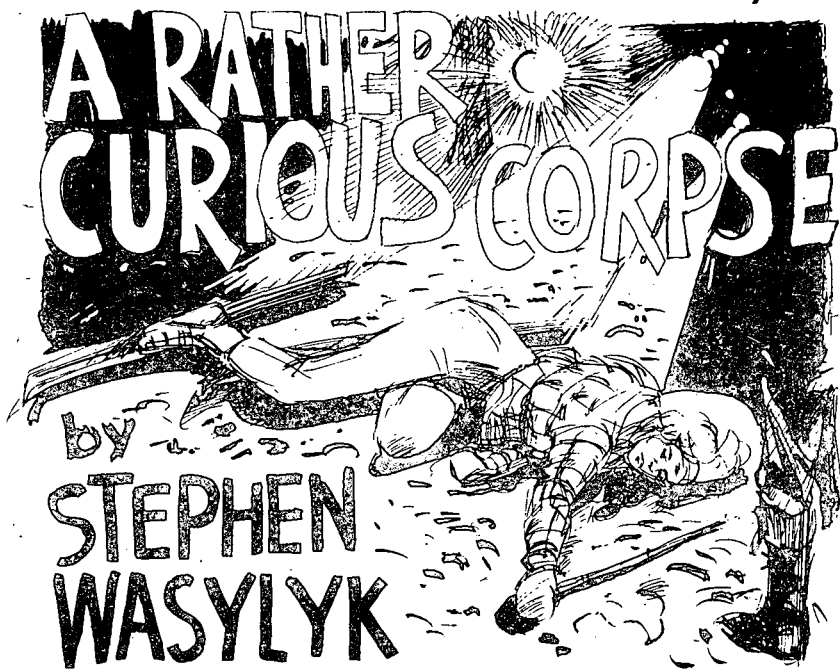
A slow, grim smile formed on the Kid's mouth. All right, he thought, come and get it, boys. Simmons must be avenged, his killer brought to justice. So when the showdown's over, it'll be *you* lying face down in the dust and me who lives on to fight again.

His hands jerked down, came up again with the twin Peacemakers spitting flame and smoke and bullets into the hot afternoon. You can't kill the hero, boys, he was thinking. Nobody can ever kill the hero.

And the blazing guns of the Rio Rangers cut him down.

**The March 26 Issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's*
Mystery Magazine will be on sale February 28.**

Gates was sure this wasn't just a skiing accident . . .



The electric torches of the search party spotlighted the body of the red-haired woman. She was lying on her side in the snow on the night-covered mountainside, her powder-blue ski outfit dusted with white crystals. She still wore her skis. One foot was outthrust, the other curled beneath her. Her sunglasses had been knocked askew and the bruise on her white forehead showed where she had run into a low limb.

I straightened and motioned for them to take her away, conscious of

A RATHER CURIOUS CORPSE

how deeply the wind and cold had seeped beneath my heavy parka during the search. I lighted one of my infrequent cigarettes as if the glowing tip could restore some warmth to my stiff body; found it did not, and threw it away.

There were periods during the winter when the wind uncoiled somewhere in Outer Mongolia, roared across Alaska and down through Canada, and whipped through the Fox River Valley, bone-chilling and knife-edged and sometimes laden with snow. On those days Julio and I found duty in the sheriff's office routine, with time to sit next to the wood-burning oil drum stove he had rigged up, drink coffee, and talk. Our only excitement was the settling of an occasional marital squabble, since confining a man and a woman indoors for any length of time is certain to bring out the flaws in any marriage. And occasionally we ran into an accident.

Like this one.

A shape loomed dark against the white snow. "Gates?"

"I'm sorry about your wife, Royce," I said. "I didn't expect this."

The voice was somber. "Neither did I. When I called you for help I thought we'd find her injured, that's all."

"Nothing more to be done," I said. "Go home, Royce. I'll tell Sebastian and come by in the morning. We'll talk then."

I sensed him nod and he disappeared down the slope toward the lights of the house far below. I followed.

When I reached the four-wheel drive I slung my snowshoes into the back, started the engine, and let the heater thaw me a little before following the line of searchers' cars already in motion.

Royce Bolden's isolated house was halfway up the side of the mountain where the slope flattened a bit before climbing again. Far below, the lights of the town gleamed in the crisp night.

Several miles away, I broke away from the caravan by turning into a private road that curved upward to a loop at the door of a stone mansion tucked into the side of the hill.

I pushed the bell. A middle-aged woman wearing an apron answered the door.

"Mr. Rieber at home, Sara?"

"He's in the study." She led me through the large center hall.

The man in the easy chair before the huge fireplace was about forty. His long-straight hair was streaked with grey, his face rugged, his body lean with the look of a man who exercised regularly.

The woman with him was younger, her blonde hair parted in the center and pulled back. She wore a black dinner dress. Her skin was golden but her eyes were the shade of the purple night outside and just as cold.

The man held out his hand. "Come close to the fire, Sheriff. How about a drink?"

I shook my head.

"I have bad news, Sebastian. About Shana."

"I don't understand. My sister is in Nassau. Has there been some sort of accident?"

I nodded. "But not in Nassau. She came home this afternoon and went skiing on the mountain behind the house. You know Royce had a trail carved for her up there. She evidently hit her head on a low limb." I hesitated before saying the words. "We don't know yet whether that killed her or hurt her so badly she couldn't get up and froze to death."

The woman gasped. Rieber sank into his chair and ran his palms over his face. "That damned Royce! I told the fool that trail was fine for someone who liked to move slowly. Shana loved speed."

"I'll call Royce," said his wife.

"You *will* not," snapped Rieber. "He needs nothing from us. You know Shana was thinking of getting a divorce." He lifted a hand in dismissal. "Thank you for coming personally, Gates."

I walked out, threw the four-wheel drive in gear, and drove slowly back to the office. Only a fool drives fast on these winter roads.

That Royce Bolden and Sebastian Rieber disliked each other was no news. That Shana was thinking of a divorce was—but then again, perhaps not. Shana had been a strong-willed woman used to having her own way, a restless, independent spirit, while Royce was far steadier but equally strong-willed. He hadn't built a successful construction business by being a weakling. Oil and water, the gossips had said.

When I stepped into the warmth of the office, Julio asked, "Find her?"

"Dead. She ran into a tree."

My deputy shook his head. "Too bad. It must have been cold up on that mountain."

"So cold I'd throw another log into your magnificent stove if I could bend over without shattering."

I slipped out of my parka and stood before the stove, my fingers spread.

"How is Royce taking it?" he asked.

"Royce is a hard man to read. Sebastian is something else. Naturally he blames Royce. He never did like him."

"Sometimes I wonder who Sebastian does like. He seems to suffer from having to deal with us ordinary mortals."

I grinned. "He likes his beautiful wife."

"Maybe not as much as you think. I happened to see him and Mrs. Jensen, the loan officer at the bank, talking in the parking lot the other day. It looked like a very friendly conversation."

"Don't get the wrong idea. Knowing Sebastian, it probably had more to do with money than sex."

"I don't know. After all, he must have normal feelings buried somewhere inside—but then maybe he really is the god he believes himself to be."

I shrugged. Feeling my blood beginning to flow normally, I sank into my chair. "You might as well check out, Julio. Your wife is waiting."

He lifted a hand as he passed. "I'll stop by the diner and have them send over some sort of dinner. Anything you prefer?"

"Just let it be hot."

Several hours later, the phone had rung only twice—one call a routine question, the other from the editor of the weekly newspaper asking for details of Shana's death. Close to ten it rang again and Dr. Blenheim, who acted as the county medical examiner, said, "I may have misunderstood what I was told when the body was brought in, so I need you to confirm it, Gates. How long was Shana Bolden on that slope?"

"Six to eight hours."

"Then you've presented me with a rather curious corpse. For her body to be in the state you found it she would have had to be out there for a much longer period."

"Impossible. According to her husband she just got back from Nassau this afternoon."

"Then Royce is either mistaken or lying. That woman was never near Nassau. There are certain signs a body exhibits when it's been frozen for a long period. She has them."

I let a few moments pass. "Can you prove it?"

"I'd have to get an expert opinion."

"But you're sure?"

"I'm sure. I'll have more information for you tomorrow—but before

then I suggest you try to find out how long she really was on that mountain."

"Can you determine the time of death?"

"At this point? Impossible."

"I can't believe she could have been on that slope for a week."

"Why not? With the temperature no higher than ten degrees for days and so little sun, the body would be preserved as if it had been in a freezer. And as I understand it, Royce owns that land. Who else would go there?"

"But why shouldn't the death have been reported immediately? She had to turn up eventually."

"When you find out, let me know."

I tossed and turned before I dozed off, wondering how a woman could lie dead on a mountain while people believed she was in Nassau.

When Julio checked in the next morning I told him what Blenheim had said, left him with his mouth hanging open, and drove to Royce Bolden's home. The thermometer outside the office read ten below.

The rise behind the house appeared cold and somber in the grey morning. Royce had sent one of his bulldozers and a crew zigzagging up and down the mountainside to carve out an exaggerated slalom pattern, which gave his wife her own private ski area in her backyard. It wasn't too difficult to climb, but only an expert would have had the skill and the nerve to pick up any sort of speed coming down. The trail wasn't wide and the trees were thick and close, so when Shana had miscalculated either her speed or the turn she had had nowhere to go. For a limb to be the exact height of her fast-moving head was the chance that makes accidents.

The bell brought Royce to the door in a robe and pajamas. If the death of his wife had caused him to lose any sleep it didn't show. He was in his mid-thirties but his hair was already sprinkled with grey—a big man with broad shoulders and the leathery look that showed he spent a great deal of time outdoors.

"You keep early hours, Gates. Come in and join me for breakfast."

I perched on a kitchen stool as he went about breaking eggs.

"You said she just got back from Nassau yesterday afternoon," I said.

He nodded. "Keep your eye on the food. I have something to show you."

He disappeared into the living room and returned with two sheets of pink notepaper. "These will explain it all."

I scanned the notes. Dated a week ago, one said she was leaving for Nassau to think, for him not to try to locate her, and she would be back eventually. The other said: "Royce darling, it is so good to be home. Have come to the conclusion that I prefer snow—and you. I'm going out on the hill for an hour. I'll watch for you to drive in and be right down. Love, Shana."

"We had an argument a week ago," he said. "I found the first note when I came home the next evening. When I noticed her car gone I figured she had left, but the note was a surprise." He shrugged. "If that was the way she wanted it, it was fine with me. I made no attempt to call her there. I didn't know she'd returned until I drove up yesterday and found her car in the driveway. The second note was on the mantel. Since it was already dark, I knew she should be back. But if something had happened it would be foolish for me to search for her alone, especially since she might be hurt and need help. That was when I called you."

"What was she going to Nassau to think about?"

"A divorce. We'd been arguing a great deal lately. She insisted there was another woman, and she was right. Since it will come out anyway, I'll tell you. I've been seeing Melissa Cramer."

"The librarian?"

He nodded. "She's a quiet woman. Not like Shana."

"No," I said. "Not like Shana. The note indicates she changed her mind about the divorce."

"I didn't understand it. I thought we had agreed we should break up."

I finished the breakfast. "As far as you're concerned, she changed her mind in Nassau?"

He shrugged. "I don't know." He stared out the window. "I don't want you to think I'm unfeeling or heartless, Gates, but it was over. That's all there is to it."

"Not quite," I said.

I put the notes in my pocket, left, and drove to Sebastian Rieber's house.

The housekeeper let me in. Sebastian was having breakfast in a dining room that overlooked the valley. I declined an invitation to join him and asked, "How did you know Shana was in Nassau?"

His eyes were cold. "What sort of question is that?"

"Humor me."

"She sent me a note telling me she was going there for a week to think about a divorce and she'd call when she returned."

"Do you still have the note?"

"Why should I keep it?"

"So you really don't know if she was there or not?"

The eyes were contemptuous. "There was no reason to doubt it."

I donned my fur-lined hat. "I don't suppose there was."

Julio looked up as I came in. "Did you find out anything?"

"I don't know yet. Is everything quiet?"

"Have you looked at the thermometer? It's too cold for crime."

"Maybe not." I leafed through a file drawer until I found the paper I wanted, slid it into my pocket, and headed for the door.

Julio's voice followed me. "Once again our intrepid crime fighter ventures out into the frigid wintry blasts in pursuit—"

I slammed the door.

Finding a parking spot in the business district at that hour on a winter morning was no problem. I climbed over the snow piled along the curb and rang the bell of a small storefront with the legend: MADAME BOMBAZI, READINGS.

The woman who answered was middle-aged and stately, the bones in her face prominent and giving her a hawkish look, her eyes deepset. In gypsy dress and heavy makeup in the summertime, she emanated enough authority to convince the most doubtful tourist that her prognostications couldn't possibly fail. On weekends during the winter she held court at a ski-resort dining room reading tea leaves.

She smiled. "Is this a bust or do you want your fortune told?"

"Neither, Naomi. I'd like to take advantage of one of your talents."

Her eyebrows arched. "That's an offer from a handsome man I can't refuse, even if it is rather early. Come in and be more specific."

She led me to a well furnished and comfortable room behind the small studio.

I handed her the notes I had obtained from Royce, together with the traffic-accident report filed by Shana Bolden from my files. "You're the closest thing to a handwriting analyst I have, Naomi. Look at these and tell me if they were written by the same person."

She smiled slightly. "I see. You're here to see Madame Bombazi, not Naomi Clark. I'm disappointed."

She went to a small desk, switched on a bright light, and studied the papers. Finally she pushed the accident report aside and picked up the two notes. "These were not written by Shana Bolden, even though her name is on them."

"Would the difference be noticeable to someone familiar with her handwriting?"

"Not unless they had reason to look closely—yet they aren't forgeries in the sense that someone deliberately tried to imitate her hand. I'd say they were written by a woman with very similar handwriting, and simply accepted as being from Shana because there was no reason to believe they were not."

"You're sure it was a woman?"

"No question at all. No man would write like that."

I slid the papers into my pocket. "Too bad you can't read your tea leaves and tell me who she is."

She smiled. "She will, of course, be somewhat like Shana. Handwriting doesn't lie."

I thanked her and left her in the doorway. I had one foot up on the bank of snow along the curb when I heard someone call me.

The man coming toward me had his hat pulled low and the fur collar of his heavy coat up around his neck. His prominent nose was red with cold.

"Morning, Mercer," I said. "How's the town's leading banker?"

He made an impatient gesture with a gloved hand. "What's this I hear about Shana Bolden?"

"I don't know what you've heard but she's dead. It was a skiing accident."

"What a terrible thing! Royce should have called me immediately. After all, I do handle her finances."

"He'll get around to it."

"You don't understand. It's a very complicated estate. I'll need all the time I can get."

It was in poor taste but I couldn't resist, because if anyone was more interested in money than Sebastian Rieber, it was Mercer Ford. "Just draw a line through the center of town, Mercer. Shana owned the left half and Sebastian the right."

I drove away from his indignant glare, went back to the office, and explained my morning's activities to Julio.

"You realize that none of this makes sense," he said. "Why should anyone go to so much trouble to hide an accident for a week? And how could someone be sure neither her husband nor her brother would try to get in touch with her in Nassau?"

"Easy. The notes took care of that problem. When a woman like Shana tells you something, you generally accept it. Neither of them had reason to believe she hadn't done exactly as the notes said. But let's see how far it went in case Royce or Sebastian did try to get in touch. Call the airlines in New York. See if any of them has a record of Mrs. Royce Bolden flying to Nassau during the past week—and if you find one, see if you can track down a flight attendant who might remember her and give you a description. I'm going to see Blenheim. He may know more by now than he did last night."

I found Dr. Blenheim in his office at the hospital. He was tall and thin and could have doubled as a young Abe Lincoln.

"Don't tell me you haven't started yet," I said.

He smiled. "Relax. Since I knew you'd be pushing me, I made other arrangements. I have a young intern who's interested in that phase of medicine who volunteered to do the post-mortem this morning. The report isn't typed yet, but I'll give you the high points. She died from the blow on the head, all right—but the bones in her left wrist were broken also, as if she'd thrown up that arm to protect herself. Now, if you wish to believe she was going fast enough to cause that, that's your prerogative. I don't happen to think so. I think from the force required that she was struck with some sort of heavy club. You don't have an accident here, you have a murder—which may be the reason the body was concealed for a week."

"But you still can't fix the time of death?"

"Medically no, but—" He pushed an envelope toward me. "These were her possessions."

I spilled the envelope onto his desk. There was a set of keys, her sunglasses, and a small calendar watch with a broken crystal. The watch had stopped.

The date in the little window was a week ago, the hands were set at one-thirty.

"Evidently it was smashed when she threw up her arm," he said. "You can't tell me she spent a week in Nassau with that broken watch on her wrist. You wanted proof of time of death. You have it—but don't ask me to explain it."

I hefted the watch in my hand. "And without this?"

"You have your work cut out for you. What are you going to do now?"

I slid the watch into the envelope and carefully tucked it into my shirt pocket. "Proceed on your supposition. Whoever killed her overlooked the watch—and it's the one thing that can blow the case sky-high. I can spend a lot of time working this out, or I can cut a few corners—take a small gamble."

"What kind of a gamble?"

"That whoever did it believes I'm too honorable to lie."

Julio was waiting with a satisfied look on his round face. "I found the airline and a stewardess who remembers an attractive red-haired woman named Mrs. Bolden. So does a clerk at a hotel in Nassau she told me to check."

I thought for a moment. "And I'll bet that if either Royce or Sebastian did call Mrs. Bolden there she would be out and never return the call, but it would be enough to establish her presence."

I dialed Sebastian's number. Sara, the housekeeper, answered. "Mr. Rieber is not at home," she said.

"Do you know where he is, Sara?"

"At a meeting at the bank. Mr. Ford called and asked him to come over. He said something about Mr. Bolden being there also."

I cradled the phone. "I'd intended to call a family meeting," I told Julio, "but it looks like Mercer Ford did it for me. If you need me, I'll be at the bank."

Business hours were over, but the guard smiled at me through the plate-glass door and unlocked it.

"Where's the meeting?" I asked.

He motioned. "In the conference room, Sheriff."

I tapped at the heavy walnut door and pushed it open.

Seated at the large rectangular walnut table were Royce and Sebastian. At the head, with papers spread before him, was Mercer Ford. At the foot was the family attorney, Tobias Kragg. In his mid-sixties, small and

thin, Kragg had achieved a name as a superior attorney thirty years before, and his reputation had lost none of its luster.

Ford rose. "Really, Sheriff Gates—"

"I apologize," I said. "I had wanted to talk to Royce and Sebastian, but I'm happy to see you and Tobias here, because what I have to say concerns you also."

I told them what Blenheim had said. They all stared at me.

"If such a thing is true," said Sebastian, "what reason could anyone have to kill my—" He broke off and his eyes found Royce. He half rose from his chair. "You! You're the only one with a motive!"

"What motive is that?" asked Royce mildly.

"The divorce."

"It was by mutual agreement. If anyone did kill her—which I doubt—it was probably you. The two of you had one of your classic arguments about the estate that still have to be settled."

Sebastian stiffened. "I'd expect you to make such an accusation."

"Everyone sit down and be quiet," said Tobias Kragg calmly. He turned to me. "There are two elements here, Sheriff. First, that she died a week ago; and second, that someone killed her. What proof do you have for either of these preposterous allegations?"

"None. All we have is a sound medical opinion and a few suppositions."

"That is not legally sufficient."

"I'm aware of that, but I think we can find physical proof. Dr. Blenheim noticed indentations in the flesh of her wrist which indicate she was wearing a bracelet or a watch. When she threw up her arm to protect her head, the blow broke the band." The words came out smoothly, as though I had rehearsed the lie. "When Shana filled out an accident report last summer I noticed she was wearing a small, expensive calendar watch. She said Royce had given it to her for their second anniversary. Is that so, Royce?"

"She wore it constantly."

"Then she was probably wearing it when she was killed. And if, in addition to being knocked from her wrist, the watch was smashed by the blow, it would not only indicate the time she died but the day. That watch has to be up there somewhere. I intend to put a dozen men out there tomorrow to comb the mountain from top to bottom. If we find it, fine. If not, we'll keep trying. Eventually we'll turn it up, even if it takes until spring."

"I still think you're crazy," said Royce.

"Upon reflection, I agree," said Mercer Ford. "The whole idea is very far-fetched. You say another woman wrote the notes. Who?"

"The same one who put on a red wig and flew to Nassau as Mrs. Royce Bolden, and that's another avenue to investigate."

Kragg made a sound suspiciously like a snort of disbelief. "We appreciate your devotion to duty, Sheriff, but perhaps you should have presented us with more than Dr. Blenheim's opinion, as reliable as it has been in the past. You will excuse us, I'm sure."

I nodded and left.

An hour later, I pulled the four-wheel drive off the road not far from Royce's house, turned off the engine, and waited. Early winter darkness had settled in, turning the landscape into a monotone of grey snow and black trees.

Julio was parked near the bank in the other four-wheel drive and when the meeting broke up, he'd call me, which would give me time to move into position near the ski trail at the rear of Royce's house.

Royce and Sebastian had accused each other. As far as I was concerned, one or the other was right. Only they had been close enough to Shana to have a motive, and I was betting that the man responsible would try to find that watch tonight, before my nonexistent search party arrived in the morning. He wouldn't consider it a chore. He knew exactly where she had been when he had struck her down and he could easily cover a small area in a short time with a good flashlight.

Julio's voice crackled over the radio.

"They're leaving, Gates."

"I'll see you at the office later," I told him.

I slipped my thermos of hot coffee and flashlight into my pockets and slugged over to where the trail began at the rear of Royce's house. I leaned against a tree, pulled my hat down, and fastened my collar. I didn't know how long I'd be here or even if either of them would show up. It was, after all, a gamble. If it failed, Julio and I would start putting the case together piece by piece—determine which woman had been out of town, interview the stewardess and the hotel clerk and show them pictures, check alibis for the time Shana had died. One way or the other I'd find the person responsible.

In spite of my heavy clothing and boots, the cold began to seep through

to my body, and it occurred to me that if it was Royce there was nothing to prevent him from searching for the watch as soon as he got home. Sebastian, on the other hand, would have to be far more careful. He might even wait until he felt Royce had gone to bed. I grimaced. By that time I'd probably be frozen solid. I began doing little setting-up exercises to keep my blood flowing.

The headlights of a car swept into the driveway. After a moment the lights in the house blazed. I waited. Whatever Royce was doing, he was making no move toward me. I helped myself to some coffee, more for warmth than for sustenance. After about an hour the lights went out again, the headlights flared, and the car pulled out.

Well, that leaves Sebastian, I thought, and that tan his wife is wearing means what I thought it did—

I really didn't see the figure at first. I only sensed a dark shape had moved where nothing should have, and then it became slightly more defined against the greyness of the snow behind the house—a hulking shadow.

A flashlight suddenly pooled a disk of brightness at the figure's feet, the pool moving slowly. I was puzzled until I realized we had assumed Shana had been killed where we had found her, but that was obviously a mistake. The figure was searching for something in the thin layer of snow at the rear of Royce's house, next to a stack of fireplace logs. He could only be searching for the watch—which meant she had been killed there and the body moved up onto the mountain to give credence to the supposed accident.

That was all I needed. I moved out from behind the tree woodenly, my cold-stiffened legs reluctant. I pulled the flashlight from my pocket as I neared the figure, aimed it, and flicked the button.

Nothing happened. The light was dead. But the man heard me or sensed my presence. His flashlight swung up and glared in my eyes. I heard a curse and the light flew toward my head. I ducked and it glanced off my shoulder.

I heard the man racing toward the side of the house. I followed heavily in time to see a car parked down the road leap to life with a roar and blaze of headlights. As I dashed toward my own vehicle it flashed by, twin red taillights disappearing down the road. As I jerked the four-wheel drive into motion, the distinctive hollow boom of a fast-moving car striking an immovable object was loud in the night.

A few hundred yards down the icy road, I found where he had skidded and smashed into a tree almost head-on, then spun and demolished the side of the car.

I threw open the door of the four-wheel and raced toward the wreck. The odor of raw gasoline hung pungent and heavy in the cold night air, accompanied by a slight hissing sound. I pulled at the twisted door savagely, forcing it open. Frantically, I dug my hands into the shoulders of his coat and pulled him free, dragging him perhaps thirty yards before the car exploded. The shock knocked me flat and heat washed over me.

I knelt staring down at him in the glare of the headlights and the fire before I tore off my gloves and pressed my fingers to his throat, seeking a pulse. There was none.

Mercer Ford had been dead when I dragged him from the car.

It was late. I sat in the living room of the Ford home with Mrs. Ford and Tobias Kragg.

Kragg said, "I've given Mrs. Ford permission to tell you what happened, Sheriff, in the interest of clearing the matter up quickly. While she is culpable to some degree, I'm sure I can persuade the county attorney and Royce that prosecution will serve no purpose."

She was slim, of medium height, her dark hair cut close, her skin slightly tanned, her features almost patrician. She was younger than Mercer, a close friend of Shana's—they had grown up together and attended the same schools.

"I suppose it began the day he noticed my handwriting was similar to Shana's," she said in a soft voice. "A few days later he brought home some documents and a sample of her signature. He wanted me to sign her name. It was nothing serious or important, he said. He only wanted to divert some money from one of her most liquid accounts temporarily to solve a problem he had."

I leaned back in my chair. "You had no objection?"

"Of course—but Mercer said there would be no repercussions. I trusted him implicitly."

So had Shana Bolden, I thought.

"There was nothing more until several weeks later. Shana called him. She intended to divorce Royce and leave Fox River, and she wanted to use the money in that account to purchase a condominium in Colorado. Naturally, Mercer couldn't comply. He said he would go see her and

confess what he had done. He was sure, in view of his long relationship with the family, that while she would be angry she'd be willing to wait a few days for him to replace the money. He arranged to see her."

She rubbed her forehead. "I really don't know exactly what happened—except that Shana was not forgiving at all. She intended to have him arrested. There was an argument. Mercer lost control at the thought of being disgraced and struck her with a piece of firewood." Her eyes appealed to me. "Shana could be quite nasty, you know."

I said nothing.

"He knew he'd lose everything if the truth came out. She had been dressed to go skiing. He conceived the idea of an accident and managed to get her body up onto the mountainside. But after he did that he realized that if her body was found her accounts would be frozen and he'd be unable to replace the money. That was when he thought of making it appear as if she'd left town. He rushed home and asked me to accompany him back to the house. He persuaded me to write the notes to Royce and Sebastian on Shana's stationery and hide her car in our garage."

I stared at her. "And you made no protest?"

Her shoulders lifted. "I couldn't bring Shana back, and I had to protect him. I made reservations in her name and flew to Nassau. He called me there when he'd replaced the money. I came back yesterday, returned the car, and wrote the second note to Royce. You know the rest."

I walked out into the cold night with Kragg. "She isn't the first person to suspend all moral values, reason, and logic for the man she loved," he said.

I felt I had heard a story tailored to fit the circumstances—that something was missing. Naomi Clark had said that the woman who wrote the notes had a strong personality like Shana's. If Naomi was right, I couldn't see Mrs. Ford going along with her husband so easily. She would have played a much larger part.

"I don't accept that," I said. "Mercer may have misappropriated the money originally, but Shana was *her* friend. *She* went up there to talk to her. *She* killed her. Then she called *Mercer* for help. He took over from there. He went looking for that watch to protect her—not himself."

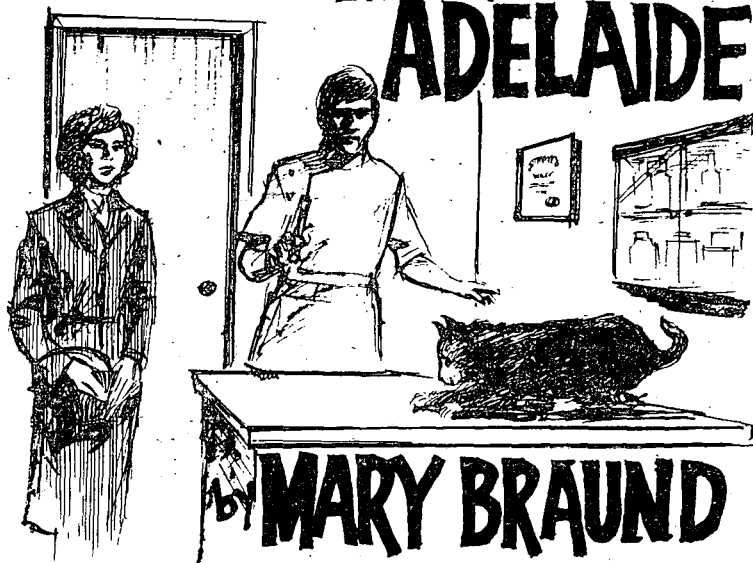
"A fanciful conjecture, Gates."

I shrugged. "I don't think so. As Madame Bombazi said, handwriting doesn't lie."

Adelaide was no use to anyone



MY FRIEND ADELAIDE



by **MARY BRAUND**

It was the putting to sleep of the cat that gave me the idea. Putting to sleep? A euphemism, of course. I mean putting to death, doing away with. Killing. That cat was a poor wee cowering timorous animal, not the curse of birds and mice that a real cat should be. We had had him for two years and all that time he had darted and scurried away from us, a scared, fearful thing. At the end of two years, I had had enough. I took the pathetic creature to the vet.

"Put it to sleep," I ordered.

"But why?" the vet wanted to know.

"Because," I said, not really wanting to answer the question, "because he is not a normal cat. He's unhappy and he makes the rest of us unhappy."

And so the cat was done in, disposed of. And I felt better.

Which brings me to my friend Adelaide. Now a woman is not the same thing as a cat, I realize that, but she had just the same problem—fear and unhappiness. And she was doing just the same thing to the family that the cat had done. She made us jumpy, nervous, worried, afraid that it was us that was causing the trouble. The difficulty is that a human being is not as easy to deal with as an animal. Many a night before I fell asleep, I thought about my friend Adelaide. She somehow qualified as a friend because I had known her for fifteen years, which is longer than I had known the cat. And, though we had nothing in common, I had always felt sorry for her—just as I had for the cat.

I continually searched for ways to soothe her, placate her sadness, make a better life for her. First of all I thought she needed to get married, but then when she did and things seemed no better I decided the marriage was wrong. Then she got divorced and needed time to get over it, but three years later, when we were all still suffering with her, I decided that maybe it was Adelaide who was wrong in herself. There are some people who just can't live life right.

Adelaide was a nurse, but she had always hated nursing. She had become a nurse because her mother said she should, but that didn't seem to me a very good reason for staying one. There are other jobs in the world.

Adelaide stayed with us at frequent intervals. First it was the odd weekend, the occasional visit. Then she came to recover from the divorce and was with us for weeks, weeping and wringing her hands. Another interval, then she got sick and came to convalesce and the days dragged into weeks again before she felt well enough to return to work. Next she lost her job, ran out of money, and came to stay while she looked for another. For some reason, though nurses are always in short supply, it was two months before she found anything remotely satisfying and in the end I had to search the city to find her another apartment. She was too tired after work to find one for herself.

We introduced her to our friends. When we invited the few spare men we knew to come to dinner with us, Adelaide would get a migraine or

break out in a rash. We took her out in the boat and she got seasick. We gave her a parakeet to keep her company in her apartment and, sure enough, the parakeet got sick and died. Adelaide was no use, you see. A hopeless case.

When Adelaide lost her job again, I knew something had to be done. A vet was what I needed, a vet to whom I could say, "Look, this poor creature is no good to anyone, least of all herself. Let's just put her out of her misery."

But one can't do that, can one? I did send her to see a psychiatrist, hoping he would have some marvelous mind-solving drug that would transform her, but all he did was to give her some tranquilizers that sent her to sleep all day—which is how she lost her job. I exhausted the doctor situation: a gynecologist for her pelvic problems, a dermatologist for her rashes, an internist for her bowels, which were always seizing up. Nothing did any good. I could see that I was stuck with Adelaide for the rest of my days unless I did something myself.

Why did I do all these things? Well, I have to admit I'm the organizing type. I'm proud of it. I like to see people happy. I can't bear to see suffering, human or animal. I kept a happy home for my children and my husband, Gil. *He* wouldn't worry about Adelaide or try to sort out her life. He had more important things to deal with: the rise and fall of the stock market, whether he would become a partner in the company. He had no time for the problems of someone like Adelaide or the fact that she was upsetting me, distracting me from the important things of life. Emotions were not Gil's strong point.

So I plotted. From day to day I worked out how I could dispose of Adelaide—without her hurting, of course—and eventually I came up with the right plan. I carefully stole, bit by bit, some of Gil's sleeping pills—he had a lot of trouble sleeping. I would go round to Adelaide's full of sympathy—which I was, of course—and I would make her some hot chocolate—she liked hot chocolate—and as I stirred in all those pills I would tell her, "Adelaide, what you need is a good husband and kids and if you'd just relax, give yourself over to life a little, you'd get it, really you would. Change your hairstyle, buy some new clothes," and she'd never know because she couldn't tell one drink from another. No one would ever question it because everyone knew what Adelaide was like. They would probably come to me and ask me about it—I was her friend, after all—and I would tell them, "Yes, Adelaide was a very unhappy

person," and "No, I'm not surprised she took an overdose. All that surprises me is that she didn't do it a long time ago."

And that would be that.

It took me a while to get it all thought out and in all that time I didn't hear from Adelaide. Which was surprising because she couldn't usually get along without my advice and comfort. It began to bother my conscience a little, her without a job and lonely, so at last I called her.

"I've got a new job," she said, "and a new apartment." Somehow she did not seem altogether pleased to hear from me, but I knew that the old familiar pattern would reassert itself sooner or later—the job wouldn't last or her rent would become overdue.

"Good," I said reassuringly. "I'll come round to see you tomorrow evening after work. I'd like to hear all about the job and I'd like to see your new place."

"They're terrible," she said. "The apartment and the job."

There. I knew how it would be. "I'd still like to talk to you," I persisted.

"I can come to your house."

"No." That would never do. "It will be a change for me to visit you."

"I'm working the late shift this week."

"Then I'll come in the morning." Chocolate or coffee, it wouldn't matter; I had made up my mind.

"I'm going shopping in the morning," she said. She was trying to get out of seeing me, I could tell, and that intrigued me. Adelaide had always been very glad of my company.

"Then I'll come the day after tomorrow," I insisted.

"Oh, all right." She gave in quite suddenly, but not graciously, not at all.

That morning I put on my new blue suit. I like to look nice when I go out—no jeans or sweatshirts for me—and I put the sleeping pills in my purse, neatly wrapped in a piece of tissue paper. I found Adelaide's place, a big old house in a run-down part of town though the house looked quite good itself, fresh paint on the door and the trees thick and full along the sidewalk. When I reached the second floor, she was standing waiting for me.

"I saw your car," she explained. "I was watching through the window for you." Her large dark eyes, the best feature in her face, slid away from mine.

The room she led me into was really quite pleasant, not well furnished of course, but there were a few bright throw-rugs scattered about and lots of green plants which gave the room a comfortable feel. I looked at Adelaide. She seemed different somehow, though still on edge, her fingers twisting together, but then that was nothing new about Adelaide. She was always worried about something. No, it was her overall appearance that was different, her hair smooth and shining, her eyes brighter. Her skin had a kind of sheen to it that was becoming and she had put on weight so that she was no longer uncomfortably angular. She was wearing a long caftan that flowed with her movements.

"Goodness," I said, throwing myself into the one armchair and searching in my bag for my cigarettes, "you look well. The new job must be suiting you."

"I hate it. The same old grind, day after day. I've got to get out of nursing."

I sighed. She had been saying the same old thing for years.

"Well, then, if it's not the job it's something else." I lit my cigarette. "You've got a boy friend?"

She looked at me sharply, drawing in her breath. She didn't speak for a long moment, as though searching for words, and then finally she said, "How did you guess?"

"My dear girl, it sticks out a mile. You look like a well fed pussy cat. I'm delighted."

I suppose I was delighted. Though, after all that thought and planning, it was hard to mentally unscrew the scrap of tissue paper and throw away the pills.

Adelaide didn't look as pleased as she should have. "There are complications," she said.

The smoke from my cigarette wreathed up between us. "Oh, God," I said. "He's not married?"

"I'll get some coffee," she said, and I knew it was true. It was just like Adelaide to get herself involved with a married man. She couldn't do anything right.

"So? What are you going to do about it?" I asked when she came back with the coffee.

"Do? What should I do? He loves me and I love him but he's married and has children and responsibilities, so that's that."

Wasn't that typical of her? To just sit there and accept her fate.

She put the tray with the mugs of coffee, steaming in the cool of the room, in front of me. "It's enough for me to know that he loves me." She paused and gave a faint, satisfied smile. "In any case, I'm going to have a baby."

"A baby?" For once, I was almost at a loss for words. I heard myself shrieking. "A baby! In this day and age when they can be got rid of so easily?"

She sat on the floor in an unfamiliarly graceful movement and handed me a mug. "But I don't want to get rid of it. A baby is the one thing in life I've most wanted. Now I'm content."

"And you aren't going to make this man marry you?"

She shook her head, saintly and long-suffering. God, how she irritated me!

"Do you have any idea," I asked at last, staring at her, "what it will be like to bring up a child on your own?"

"I won't be alone. He'll look after us, give us money, come and see us. We'll be all right."

It was the "we" and "us" that shook me. She was so calm and sure of herself, not like the old Adelaide at all. It seemed as though she really could get along without my help for once. I should have been relieved but instead I felt shut out, left in the cold. Absurd.

"Don't tell Gil," she pleaded as I left. "I wouldn't want him to know before he has to."

I went home and told him that very night, just before we were going to bed. Somehow I wanted him to hear the latest stupid thing my poor friend Adelaide had done.

"A baby," he said. "A baby!"

The strangest expression came into his eyes, a mixture of pleasure and relief and gladness, and right away I knew.

"It's you!" I gasped. "You! You're her lover!" I could hardly believe it. "How could you? That poor pathetic snivelling creature—how could you possibly love her?"

"She was so defenseless," he said, spreading his hands in supplication. "So vulnerable, so much in need of love. Not like you. You've got everything worked out. You never hurt, not like her. She's so gentle, so submissive—not domineering, not organized, not like you. Not at all like you."

The pain began then, spreading through my heart and brain, and I couldn't bear it. I never could stand suffering, especially when it's mine. Especially when it's mine. But I think I could possibly have borne it if only he hadn't said, "She reminds me of the cat, you know—that poor little cat you had put to sleep. We all loved him, you know. He was a defenseless little creature."

I wanted to be furious, raging, to tear my hair and pound my breast and rend my clothes. But I'm not like that. I am organized, as Gil said—cool, calm. I took a deep breath.

"Let's talk about it," I said. "Let's have a drink and talk about it."

"There's nothing to talk about," he mumbled. But he accepted the drink from me, the bourbon with all the pills stirred into it, and I sat and watched him drink it. I couldn't bear to see him destroy his home, his family, his career. I couldn't bear to see him suffer.

Tomorrow I'll think about my friend Adelaide.

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LETTERS

Today I made a great discovery. A reasonably up-to-date copy of *AHMM* in an English newsagent's. What a joy! As both a reader and writer of crime tales I find myself poorly catered for in Britain . . . Would you believe that there remains only one magazine in this country that publishes original crime fiction exclusively? And that is a quarterly publication.

How about running a feature each month of a new story by a British contributor? This would give us British crime writers something to strive for and it may increase your circulation in this country.

Victor H. Brown
Lincolnshire, England

It isn't feasible for us arbitrarily to feature a British contributor every month, but almost every issue of AHMM contains at least one story by a British writer. — S.C.

The best story in the July 1979 issue was "The Rattlesnake Man" by Edward D. Hoch. I always think his stories are best of all. I get the magazine every month, and read it in one evening. Then I have to wait another month for more stories. I wish it came out every week! Thank you.

Letticia Olivetti
New York, New York

Do the majority of your writers live in the New York area?

D. Courtney
Butte, Montana

Many of our contributors do live in the New York area, but by no means all. Of the eleven authors represented in this issue, for example, three live in California, two in New York State, one in New Jersey, one in Pennsylvania, one in Massachusetts, one in North Carolina, one in the State of Washington, and one in England. — S.C.

I've been an Alfred Hitchcock fan for about eighteen years. It's not easy to find the magazine up here, but when I find it I buy it and read it cover to cover in one sitting. It's always too good to put down . . . I never start reading the stories until after I've read Mr. Hitchcock's monthly letter. It's a must . . . May your excellent magazine never go out of publication.

Gloria Saint James
Abbotsford, B.C., Canada

Is it possible that the Jean Darling whose diabolical stories you publish is the child star who was so adorable in the early *Our Gang* comedies? Is she Irish? Many of her stories have an Irish setting.

W. Shiel
Cincinnati, Ohio

Yes, our Jean was also Our Gang's Jean. Many readers will also recall her as Carrie in the original Broadway cast of Carousel. In the 1978 Mystery Writers' Annual, Jean wrote: "I'm having a ball doing something I myself chose to do instead of the things trained into me from my year dot — i.e., singing, dancing, and acting." Jean lives in Ireland. — S.C.

I've been reading *AHMM* for three or four years, and the stories by Robert Twohy never fail to interest me. Though his characters and situations are sometimes offbeat — as in "Twang!" in the September issue — they are amusing and, at the same time, touching. His story "Different

Worlds" in the October issue gave a fascinating study of a man caught up by circumstances beyond his control, rather like some of Hitchcock's movies. "The Slow Punch" (December) was beautifully realistic.

Thanks for these and for all the other great stories in *AHMM*.

M. L. Thorpe
Great Barrington, Massachusetts

S. S. Rafferty's "The Sunburnt American" in your October issue traced the first meeting between Captain Jeremy Cork and his yeoman, Wellman Oaks. I've read a number of stories in *AHMM* and *EQMM* about this eighteenth-century detective. Could you tell me if they have ever been published in book form?

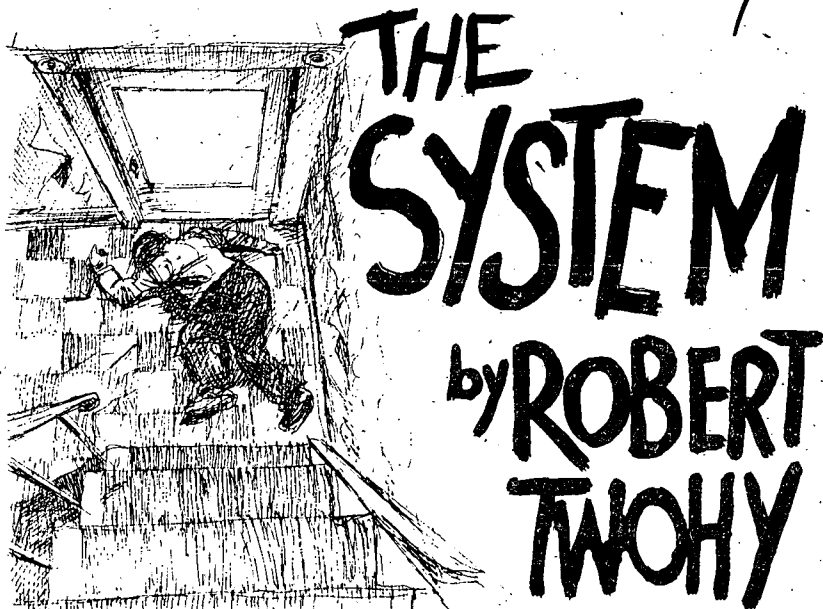
E. C. Hunter
St. Louis, Missouri

Avon recently published a paperback collection of Cork stories titled Fatal Flourishes. In a review of it in The Armchair Detective, Douglas G. Greene called it "the equal of the short-story collections by the masters of the historical detective tale, Lillian de la Torre [Dr. Sam: Johnson of eighteenth-century England] and Robert van Gulik [Judge Dee of the T'ang dynasty]." —S.C.

Please direct any letters for publication in AHMM to me, Susan Calderella, Letters Editor, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017 — S.C.



They were just six nobodies going nowhere . . .



On a Thursday night in September Jim Hobbins fell down the back stairs of the dump he lived in and broke his neck—and no one who knew him was surprised. Grieved, unhappy, but not surprised. That's a dark, steep flight of stairs, and once too often he'd taken it drunk. That was the conclusion you had to come to.

The cops did their job. That night and next day they talked to residents of the building and to people in Pete's Place, two blocks away, where

Jim was a regular. They talked to cab drivers who had worked with Jim—I was one of them—and from everyone they got the same story. This was a likeable guy of thirty-three who would do anything for a friend, who had an occasional girl but no regular girl, who liked sports, college football particularly, who gambled a few bucks on TV games, who went off to Reno two or three times in the fall and played the football-pool cards there, coming home broke but cheerful—living alone, no enemies, a guy just peaceably boozing his way through the years. Nothing the cops heard gave them any reason to think his death wasn't just what it looked—a drunk stumbling.

The picture seemed to be that Jim had let himself in the back door of his building—that door, on Hasker Alley, is almost a straight line from Pete's Place—ploughed up the steep stairs, blacked out or dozed off or missed a step at the top, and down he went. All the way to the bottom, putting some new dents in the dirty plaster wall on the way.

He had money in his pocket. The alley door and the front door on Grandway Drive both have locks and the ground floor is a couple of businesses, with no inside connection to the residence floor. So it didn't figure that an outsider had been laying for him in the dark corridor at the top of the stairs.

There were six tenants on the second floor, all in a line down the corridor—one middle-aged woman and four guys of varying ages, forty to sixty-five, and Jim. They were all friends; there were no love affairs, no close relationships—just six nobodies going nowhere and content with that, drinking buddies who lent each other money and had occasional get-togethers in one another's apartments with beer and junk food, watching a TV special or just talking and laughing and arguing about meaningless things. Jim's fall was a blow to the others. It cut their little group right at the heart.

Jack Bennett, fifty-eight, the part-time night bartender at Pete's, was the one who found him. Bennett walked home at 3:00 A.M. or thereabouts—Lindenvale is one of the few towns in the San Francisco Bay area where you can still walk downtown streets and even alleys at night—put his key in the back door, pushed, found resistance, figured it was a rolled-up rug or something that someone had propped behind the door, pushed harder, stepped in—and almost stepped on Jim's face. In the twenty-watt light over the door Bennett saw the blood, the wide-open eyes. He pounded up the stairs yelling, "Laila!"

Laila Sanchett, who's a freelance bookkeeper, has the apartment at the top of the stairs. She's the only one in the dump with a phone. She heard Bennett yelling, got out of bed, and opened her door. He pointed down the stairs, gasping, eyes wild—that was the way she told it. She hustled him in, had him sit down, and called the cops. She was at the foot of the stairs and had the door open when they got there.

Jim was a big, muscular guy, and there were the new dents in the wall. It must have made a racket when he went down. The cops asked Laila if she had heard anything.

She said that she'd been out until midnight, at the Moonduster, the other downtown bar. She said she came in the Grandway Drive door and didn't happen to glance down the stairs as she opened her own door. If she had she'd have seen Jim, because Bennett said that he'd staggered, alone, out of Pete's at about 11:00 P.M. But even if she had seen him it wouldn't have done him any good. The medical report was that he was probably dead before he hit bottom.

Nobody else along the corridor was home at the time or, if they were, capable of hearing anything. Beyond Laila's is Bennett's place—beyond him, fat Charlie the Tuna, who drives a cab at night—beyond him, old George, a pensioner who's seven-eighths deaf—and beyond him, Crazy Joe, who operates a sandwich truck and was drunk asleep. In front is where Jim had lived.

The cops found letters there indicating an address in Minnesota. Word was sent, and it turned out his grandfather lived at the address. He wrote back and said he was Jim's only relative, he hadn't seen him in twenty years, and he'd like Jim to be sent back to be buried in the family plot. He sent the money for it. So Jim went back home, and there he is now, gradually becoming part of Minnesota.

Like I said, the cops did the job they're supposed to do, and did it right—and Jim's death went down as just another accident. Nobody had any doubts about it. A nice guy, a warm-hearted guy like Jim—who would push him down a flight of stairs?

A couple of weeks after his fall I went into Pete's, and Charlie the Tuna was there—it was his night off or else he was declaring a night off. Next to him sat Don Wicker.

I didn't really know Wicker. I'd seen him now and then in Pete's, with Jim, with Charlie—they'd told me about him. He had once been their

close friend, had lived in the apartment Crazy Joe now infested, had driven a cab himself until about two years ago, which was just before I drifted into Lindenvale. They said Wicker was a great guy then, one of the regulars at Pete's. Then he'd got some money, an inheritance or something, and had moved to the other side of town, to the East Portal complex, where bachelor pads start at \$300—and they didn't see him much any more. Charlie had told me that Wicker had gone into second mortgages, whatever they are, and was doing good. A quiet, pleasant-faced, well dressed guy about fifty; I got no feel from him, for or against.

I took the stool next to Charlie, and he turned and said hi to me. Wicker gave me a slight smile and a nod. Charlie said, "We were talking about Jim. I was telling Wicker that for the first time in his life he'd finally got his stuff together. Then, whoosh!" He cracked his big hands together. "Down the stairs he goes!" His lips tightened, he looked for a second angry, bewildered—then he shrugged, sighed, shook his head, took a drink of his beer.

Wicker said after a few seconds, "You haven't said yet what he was working on."

"Your old football-card system."

Wicker looked surprised. "That? He was still working on that?"

"Not still—*again*. He didn't work on it last year or the year before. Just went up to Reno and lost his money the old, unscientific way." He chuckled, took down some more beer, said to me, "Those football cards used to be a big thing with Jim and Wicker."

Wicker shook his head, made a smile that turned down.

Charlie went on, "That was their dream. Wicker was sure there was a way to develop a system so that even if your teams lost you'd come up a winner."

That didn't make sense to me—but I don't know anything about football cards. I'm not a gambler, I've never been to Reno.

Charlie said, "Laila and Bennett and I thought they were both nuts."

"We were," Wicker said. "Drunk most of the time."

"Yeah." Charlie drank down his beer, and his eyes got a little shiny. He laughed. "Jim'd come running into my place yelling, 'I've got it, Charlie! I've figured it out!' He'd wave sheets of paper at me, start telling me what he'd worked out—it was a lot of hogwash. He'd pound me on the back and whoop that it was mathematically solid, it had the percentage edge, it'd make us all rich, we'd all move up to Reno and play the system

and be off the cabs forever. He'd yell, 'I got to show this to Wicker! If he says it's solid we got it made!' Then he'd take it to you—" he grinned at Wicker "—and you'd pick it apart."

Wicker gave that turned-down smile again. "None of his systems came to a damn. None of mine did either. I finally wised up that you can't beat Reno."

Charlie grinned, then scowled at the space in front of me. "You don't have a drink yet. Hey, Bennett!" He has a great roaring voice when he wants to—it amuses him, and people who know him put up with it.

Bennett, who had been down the bar talking to some women, hadn't seen me come in. He came over and said, "Hi. What'll it be?"

I told him a screwdriver, a beer for Charlie, and whatever Wicker was drinking.

Wicker held up a hand. "Thanks, but two's my limit."

Bennett said, "You've really cut down."

"I decided to come in out of the fog."

"Good for you." Charlie has no objection to anyone cutting down as long as it's not him. He poured his new beer and said to Bennett, "Did Jim tell you he'd cracked the football-card system he and Wicker used to spend all their drunken hours on?"

Bennett shook his head. "No, I hadn't heard him on that kick in a couple of years. . . . Wait, he *did* say something the night he—that last night. I was busy, not paying much attention. What was it? Something about Reno." He rubbed his lips, looked thoughtful, then shrugged. "I can't remember."

He picked up a glass and started to wipe it, listening as Charlie said, "He came around to my place, let's see. . . . He fell on Thursday—it was the Tuesday before. He came in and he had a sheet of paper and he wasn't drunk, he talked quiet. He said, 'I got it, Charlie. I really got it this time.'"

I looked at Wicker and he was looking at Charlie the way a guy does when he isn't especially interested but is being polite. I wasn't that interested either, but Charlie seemed to want to talk, like an older guy does when he's just starting to get a heat on, so I guess I had a polite look too. Bennett had his all-the-time look; I think it's called ironic. Charlie said, "He showed me the sheet of paper and it was laid out neat, in green ink—not the drunken mess of cross-outs and wobbly lines going nowhere like he used to show me, but a nice diagram, letters, arrows,

figures, circles around some of 'em. He told me, 'It came to me this morning, the angle Wicker and I kept missing—the percentage edge. I laid it out, kept refining it, working it out. This is the finished diagram, and it's sound.' ”

Charlie paused to take a slug of beer. “He was dead sober, and I'd never heard him explain one of his systems dead sober. The trouble was that that night *I* was drunk. I tried to follow but I couldn't, so finally he folded the sheet, stuck it in his wallet, and said he'd show it to me later. But he was working the next day, and I worked the next night, and the next day *he* worked—and I never saw him again.”

Bennett said, after we were all quiet for a little, “So you don't know if his new system was any better than the old ones.”

“No—I was too drunk. But something about him, he was quiet, not the old goofiness—and it was all laid out so neat and all. It just seemed different—I dunno. Maybe it was as nutty as all the others.”

He looked at Wicker. “In the old days he would have hustled it to you to check it out.”

Wicker nodded. “He would have. But things change.”

“Yeah,” said Charlie.

“Jim and I—well, we'd see each other when we ran into each other. Maybe two, three times in a week; maybe not for a month or so. Last time I talked to him was back in August.”

I said, “What happened to the diagram?”

But just as I said it Bennett turned his head to yell at a guy down the bar who was rapping his empty glass on it. “You keep that up and you and me aren't going to have a damn thing to say to each other!” His yell isn't as big as Charlie's but it slams in a lot harder—it doesn't have the soft edge of kidding that Charlie's has. The guy down the bar went quiet.

I started to repeat what I'd said but Bennett went on in his normal voice to the three of us, “Maybe he *was* onto something. Now I remember what he said that Thursday. He said, ‘Got to drink up fast tonight and get a good sleep 'cause it's off to Reno tomorrow.’ I said the usual—good luck. He said, ‘Not luck—percentages. I can't show you now, but after it checks out up there you'll be included.’ ”

Charlie nodded. “So Thursday night he was still hot for it.”

“Seems that way.” Bennett walked away toward the quiet guy with the empty glass; saying in a gentle voice, “Now what is it I can do for you?”

I opened my mouth to ask my question again, but Wicker got up and

touched Charlie on the shoulder in a friendly way. "I've got to get going, Tuna. See you around." He said to me, "Take it easy." I was the guy on the scene you never get his name.

"Yeah," I said. "You too."

Charlie said, "So long, Wicker. Come around more often."

Wicker gave his polite smile. "Count on it." He gave Bennett a wave, got a see-you-later back, and went out.

Charlie said, "Guy's got a brain. Not much for laughs like he used to be, but getting somewhere. Good clothes, drives a new Buick. . . . That inheritance was his big break."

"Big inheritance?"

"No, ten grand maybe—but it gave him enough to get in on the mortgages, which was something he said he'd always wanted in on. He took advantage of it. That's the difference between a smart guy and me—I've had *my* breaks along the line, and down the tubes the dough went, in pursuit of smoother booze and wilder women." He shook his head, grinning, forgiving himself—he had his beers, a job, a place along the rail at Pete's, a town where they knew him—he took things like they are. That's not a bad way to be. Better than a lot of brooding over might-have-beens or used-to-wases.

"He don't have much time for us any more. He's kind of eased out of our scene."

I was tired of Wicker. "What happened to Jim's diagram?"

"What happened to it?" He looked surprised, like he'd never thought of that. Maybe he hadn't. "I dunno." He scratched his lip, frowned. "It wasn't in his wallet. The cops showed me what was in his wallet Friday morning when I got off work. They'd showed it to all the tenants—odds and ends, old receipts, addresses, business cards, useless junk like everyone carries. They were still looking for local relatives and hadn't got the Minnesota Connection yet. The diagram wasn't in there."

"Not in his pockets?"

"No, just more junk. Nothing but junk. Except the hundred dollars, of course—his Reno money. The cops sent that to his grandfather—or I guess they did."

"How about in his apartment?"

"You still talking about the diagram? His apartment? No, we. . . ." He was looking past me, at the door, and I turned to look. Laila Sanchett, all ninety-five pounds of her, had just come in the door.

She said, "Hi, Charlie. Hi," she said to me, the man without a name. She walked behind us, took the stool the other side of Charlie. "Hi, Bennett," she said as Bennett came up. "Give me a beer and one for Charlie and a drink for his friend there."

Charlie said in a low voice, "How you making it?"

She gave him a tight smile and said, just as low, "Better—a little better. I tell myself that anyway."

I thought, No love affair? Well, that was what everyone had thought—after all, she was fifteen years older than Jim, a wiry little number, grey in the hair, not hot stuff now if she ever was—and if there'd been anything yeasty between them Charlie would have been glad to let everyone in Pete's and the Moonduster know. But maybe he wasn't loud-mouthed about everything. I don't know if there *had* been anything between Laila and Jim beyond normal drinkers' friendship, but the way she answered Charlie was a little more than you'd expect if Jim was just a good guy and former neighbor, two weeks gone.

She took a drink of her beer and said, "I guess I'll always be sorry it ended while we were having a fight."

Charlie snorted. "You weren't fighting. He was just in one of his week-long sulks, not talking to you. Acting out his favorite dramatic role—being misunderstood. He loved that role, looked forward to it. He always pulled it whenever you talked to him about his drinking."

"I thought he was throwing away so much."

"He wasn't throwing away anything. He was a great guy who was living just the way he wanted to. He fell down those damn death-trap stairs, and went like that, whoosh. I should be so lucky! My luck, they'll pack me off to a ward for the Alcoholically Incoherent and I'll live there in a cage till I'm ninety-nine."

She smiled at that. So did I. I said, "We were talking about Jim's diagram. I was asking if it could have been in his apartment."

"His diagram?" Laila looked puzzled.

"Charlie said that Jim showed him a football-card system he'd just worked up the Tuesday before he fell."

Her sharp eyes swung to Charlie. "Was he back on *that* again?"

Charlie nodded. Laila said, "I thought he was over that since Wicker moved out. Was he back working on it with Wicker again?"

"No. On his own."

"He got that idea from Wicker, that there's a mathematical system just

out of reach." I got it pretty clear that she didn't like Wicker. "I could never get it into Jim's head that Reno sets up their games on mathematical certainties."

"You're probably right." Charlie shrugged. "But I'm still sorry I was drunk when he showed it to me."

"*Could* it have been in his apartment?"

Charlie shook his head. "Laila and Bennett and Crazy Joe and I cleaned the place up. Anything decent we'd have asked the Minnesota grandfather if he wanted it sent. But it was all just junk, not fit for salvage. We tossed it all out."

"Maybe the diagram was tucked in a drawer somewhere."

"No. We emptied all the drawers, examined all the junk papers. Remember, I said Laila was in on it."

She nodded. "I even checked the papers in the wastebasket. When he was drunk, you never knew—once he was looking for his finished tax return and I found it wadded up in the wastebasket, all stuck over with bacon grease."

Charlie rumbled, "Jim had his own filing technique."

I said to Laila, "Charlie said it was a sheet folded up, a neat diagram done in green ink."

"There was nothing like that." Her voice had an edge. "What difference does it make? Another of his pipe dreams. He sobered up and threw it away. So what? What's the importance?"

Charlie started to say something, but I cut in. "You're right. It's a pointless question." Her look made me feel uneasy, a little embarrassed—like she was thinking I was hot to find Jim's system so I could start playing it. It wasn't that. I didn't really know why I was so curious about what had happened to the diagram. It just seemed to mean something, I didn't know what.

I drank at my screwdriver. They talked about Jim, funny things he had done. Bennett came over and polished some glasses and laughed with them. I felt kind of out of it. I'd liked Jim, but these three had been a lot closer to him.

I had another drink that Bennett bought us, then one on Charlie, then bought a round myself, then said goodnight to them all and walked toward my place.

On the way I met Jorst Flint, the Bear That Walks Like a Bear, and he wanted to shoot pool. We went into the Moonduster and shot pool,

and I had more screwdrivers. Finally Flint passed out on the bar, like he does every night, and Shelly behind the bar told me I'd had enough myself, to go home—so I did.

I'd had enough drinks to feel them and lay down, but things hummed around in my head. Jim's green-inked diagram—why was it missing? *Had* he tossed it away? Something was teasing at the edge of my mind, something that had been said about the diagram, or hadn't been said.

Then the humming faded out and it was like I was at the mouth of Hasker Alley, looking down it, and it was dark. There was the back door of Jim's building and beyond it the garbage cans behind the big Grandway Liquors next door, and someone was there by the garbage cans. I knew someone was there. I could see a dark shape above the shape of the garbage cans and it moved just a little, then was still again. So someone was waiting there in the dark, there by the garbage cans.

I walked up the alley and then it wasn't me walking, it was Jim. But I was there too, like I was walking alongside him—him stumbling and weaving along up the alley toward the back door of his building, and near it, by the garbage cans, that dark shape, not moving, just standing there.

I said to Jim, "Who's that waiting there?" but he didn't say anything I could understand, it was a mumble. I knew he didn't see the shape there. I said, "Can't you see there's trouble waiting there?" But I knew the way he was weaving along, just kind of mumbling to himself, that he couldn't see, and that he hadn't heard what I'd said.

He was at the door now and had fumbled his key out and was scowling down at the lock, scratching around it with the key. Then he got the key in and pushed the door open and I saw dark movement as the shape moved quietly from the garbage cans. Jim went in the entrance and took a couple of steps, fell against the wall and took hold of the stair rail, and the door on its weight swung shut behind him. No—swung almost shut. It didn't give the click it gives when it swings shut and locks. Something kept it from shutting. Someone's toe outside was pressing against it.

I was apart from Jim now but, inside the entrance, he was hanging onto the rail, head hanging now, slowly pulling himself up the stairs. I said to him, "Didn't you hear that the door didn't shut?"

He mumbled something and went on pulling himself up the stairs. Then the door opened, with no sound, and someone was standing there, someone in dark clothes.

It was a man. He stood there and, holding the knob, let the door close

THE SYSTEM

with only the quietest click. Jim didn't hear it. He was halfway up now, still bent low, pulling hand-over-hand up the rail. He went to his knees once—if he hadn't had the rail his fall might have been then. He muttered something, got up from his knees, and went on pulling himself up the stairs. The dark shape at the bottom moved slowly and without any sound up the stairs behind him, moving up the wall away from the rail. It moved to five steps below Jim, stood waiting until he had managed a few more steps, then moved on as he moved, staying four or five steps under him.

Jim was near the top now. I was yelling. I'd been yelling all the time. I couldn't help it, it was all I could do, so I did it, even knowing it wasn't doing any good, I wasn't being heard.

Jim got one foot on the landing and pushed away from the rail, straightening himself, not hanging onto anything now. He put a hand on the wall, got balance, swung his other foot, and while it was in the air the dark shape moved with no sound and was right behind him a step below, all in a second. Jim was aware of nothing. The shape shot an arm up and his hand closed on the back collar of Jim's windbreaker and pulled, the figure stepping sideward as Jim went over backward with a big terrified yell, and then hit on the stairs, his legs going straight up, and then he rolled over and over, whacking into the wall, not yelling now, just the whacking, and then he was at the bottom in a still lump, everything quiet.

Now the shape at the top of the stairs, whose face I couldn't see in the dim light in the corridor behind him, stood half a minute or so, listening, and everything was quiet inside the building and from the alley outside. He came in a quick sliding way down the stairs and bent by Jim's body. Crouched over like that he was only a dark form, I saw only his bent back and his hands going through Jim's wallet. His quick fingers took money and cards and scraps of paper out and dropped them on the cement. Then they had a folded sheet and unfolded it, dropping the wallet, then folded the sheet and slipped it into the pocket of the dark coat.

He straightened up, pushed at Jim's head with his foot, pushing it a little away from the door so he could open it. He held the door open a little way, listening, and started to go out. Then his head came back inside and he let the door fall shut and he bent down again, picked up the wallet, put the money and the scraps of paper and the cards back in it, and rolled Jim's body a little and put the wallet back in his pocket.

He pulled the door open again and listened, then squeezed his shoulders through, and the rest of him went after.

I was outside too. The alley was dark; no one was coming down it in either direction. The man moved up it very fast, making no sound, on shoes that had to be crepe- or rubber-soled, and with his dark clothes he was just a moving shape a little darker than the shadows.

He crossed Howell Street and went to the near corner, moving casually now. There were cars parked along the next block. He walked past a few and then got into one, started it, turned on the lights, and cut it out of that space smooth and fast. He was away down the street, nothing but taillights now, and the sound of a smooth, powerful motor.

Then it was like something flipping over in my head. It was a different place. I saw a close-up of the same slim fingers holding a sheet of paper by the corner, the sheet with creases in it—green figures on it, letters, arrows, a diagram—then a glow coming to the bottom corner of the paper, the fingers on top holding the paper as a flame started, getting bigger, red and yellow, brighter, very bright, and then fading, and the paper turning dark, turning black. Then everything in my head went black and I guess that was the end of my dream. I can't remember anything else.

I woke up and it was daylight. The clock on the dresser said after 6:00. I took my hangover into the bathroom and tried to shower it away. Not all of it went down the drain but enough so I could function. I dressed and went out to the doughnut shop on the near corner and had coffee and thought about my dream. It was as clear in my mind, every detail of it, as it had been when I dreamed it.

I knew who it was who'd pulled Jim's collar when he was off-balance at the top of the stairs, and why he had done it. Only one person would want Jim dead, only one—the one person who could possibly know that Jim's system worked. Who knew it worked because he had used it himself—last year maybe, or the year before—had worked it out over a long period, maybe tried thousands of combinations, looking for the mathematical edge. And totally on his own Jim had two weeks ago come on the same system, the mathematical percentage system that both he and Wicker had dreamed about. And though Wicker had pulled away from the old friendship, Jim had gone to him with the new system because he was that way—he'd naturally include the guy who had worked with him on the project, who had originated it.

And that, I thought, as I drank my second coffee, was why Wicker had

to kill him. Because Jim didn't know how to be selfish. Wicker knew how, and had been; he'd probably worked out the system a long time ago and never let on to Jim or anyone else.

He had covered his new lifestyle by putting out that he was playing the second-mortgage game. But Jim, being Jim, would let others in on this new Nevada silver strike—Laila and Charlie and Bennett and Crazy Joe and old George and us cab drivers, and other people around town he liked or wanted to help—and it would be no good for Wicker to press on him how important it is to keep quiet about a winning system. A drinker gets this uncontrollable urge to have attention, to feel important, to be loved—to stand out as a special guy, who'd give you the shirt off his back.

So Wicker had to get rid of Jim, and fast—before Jim went to Reno on Friday, tried the system, and came home with green pockets and told everyone how he'd done it, laid it out for everybody, showed them how they could latch onto the money train. If Wicker feared that, he was right—that's exactly what Jim would have done.

Jim probably saw Wicker on that Wednesday. Wicker probably said, "Yes, it looks good. Go up this Friday and play it. It may work, it may not—so don't spill anything about it yet; they'd just laugh like they've always done. This time come back with money, and they won't laugh—they'll know you've really got it, you're really special."

What was it Jim had said to Bennett? *"I can't show you now, but after it checks out up there you'll be included."*

Yeah, Bennett would be included—and everyone else. And it was Wicker's quiet gravy train that was on the line.

He had to take care of Jim for sure. And he wanted that diagram. Maybe nobody but he and Jim could make it out, but he had to be sure. If he took it and burned it, he'd be sure.

So that's what he did. Which was why it was me, not him, who had asked the question *he* should have asked—"What happened to the diagram?"

That was what had been running around the edge of my mind last night. How come it was me, not him, who had asked that question?

Because even if the old days were behind him, even if he was really the different person he let on to be, wouldn't he have been at least a little curious to see if Jim had accomplished by himself what they had failed to accomplish together?

That's what I asked myself, and answered, "Sure he would have been curious—unless he already knew what had happened to the diagram."

Which he did. Which meant that he was the dark shape in my dream who had pulled Jim down the stairs.

I finished my coffee and it was time to walk to the bus stop and catch my bus to work. But up the street two blocks west from the bus stop is the police station, and though I saw my bus coming I turned away and started walking west.

I walked a block and a half, and then walked slower. When I reached the police station I stopped and leaned against the phony-rock front and had a smoke and went over the situation.

In my mind I heard a sour cop's voice. "Any evidence of this—uh—murder?"

"Well, Jim didn't have the diagram in his wallet."

"He didn't have a diagram in his wallet. Anything else?"

"This guy at the bar Wicker didn't ask what happened to the diagram."

"This guy didn't ask about a diagram that wasn't there. Anything else?"

I said out loud, "Nothing." Standing against the wall, I shook my head and laughed.

The cops would listen to me and look at me the way they do and say, "Yeah. Well, you look like you got kind of a bag on. Why don't you go get some more sleep, then come back and tell us again whatever it is you're trying to say?"

A diagram missing, a question that wasn't asked by the man who should have asked it, a known pipedreamer tumbling down a flight of stairs the night before he'd planned a trip to Reno—that's all I had to give them. And a dream, in which I hadn't even seen the face of the man I was accusing.

I turned and walked back to the bus stop.

Wicker had done what has probably been done thousand of times—thrown a drunk down a flight of stairs and walked away—and because the guy's a drunk it's considered an accident, no questions asked.

If Jim hadn't hit on the system he'd have made it up the stairs that night like he'd done hundreds of times before. Or maybe he wouldn't have. Maybe the booze would have caught him, maybe he'd have had a blackout and taken the fall on his own. Maybe he did—maybe that's what *really* happened. And my dream—maybe there was nothing special about it at all. Just a run-of-the-mill wild drinker's dream, when he's gone

to sleep all fuddled up on the sauce.

I don't think so though. I think the dream came from somewhere outside me. Something came from the presence of Wicker, there at the bar—and from Charlie's and Bennett's and Laila's words and feelings about Jim—and it all fused into something, and when I got home and went to sleep it all came together and made a moving picture of the way things had really happened that Thursday night.

I see Wicker around town or in Pete's now and then and I say hi and he smiles his slight smile back. I keep my mind empty and I don't look at him any way but like you look at a guy you don't know very well and have nothing for or against. I don't want him to get a glimmer that he means anything to me. I'm a drinker, like Jim was—and a drinker's too damn easy to tumble if someone gets the notion he might be a threat. I don't want Wicker to get any glimmer I might be a threat. I'm not. Because there's not a thing I can do about him murdering Jim. Whether my dream was just a boozier's late-night horror show or whether in some crazy way I slipped into some other dimension, there's not a damn thing I can do.

So Wicker gets away with it. Like, I don't doubt it, thousands of others have before him—when the victim's a falling-down drunk.

We're Fighting for Your Life

Please give generously
American Heart Association 

Moran was a diamond smuggler . . .

THE UNWRITTEN CODE



The ringing telephone was barely audible over the din in the duty room. Inspector Duris picked up the receiver and cupped his left hand over his ear to shut out some of the noise.

"Inspector Duris, Homicide."

"Pete? This is Frank Adams over at Customs. We've got a problem over here we can't work out. How about lunch?"

"Sure, if you're buying. I don't get paid for this extra work, you know."

THE UNWRITTEN CODE

81

The Inspector wasn't highly paid, but he knew how to eat well when someone else was buying. And whenever another agency needed his unofficial help, he knew they were desperate enough to spring for a fine meal.

An hour later he turned into the alley that housed his favorite restaurant. It was a modest, family-owned French café—the kind of place that offers little in the way of decor but serves excellent food. Old photographs and theater posters hung on walls that had not been repainted for several years, and the small tables were set with worn checked tablecloths and paper napkins.

Frank Adams was sitting at a front table, nervously playing with a cup of coffee. He was obviously agitated but did not rush into the case. He knew from experience that the Inspector would be more receptive once the meal had begun.

The appetizer came and went quickly, and while they were waiting for the second course Adams spoke up.

"It's Ryan Moran."

"Didn't you get him for smuggling a while back?" Duris asked.

"Yes, and that's the problem," Adams said, chewing on a breadstick.

"I thought you were proud of that one."

"We were at the time." Another inch of breadstick disappeared. "Moran did eleven months on that one. But he swore he'd never let us catch him again, and it looks like he's done it."

"You mean he's outsmarted you?" Duris said. "That doesn't say much for your people. As I remember, Moran's no genius."

"He isn't," Adams said as the waiter delivered two steaming bowls of bouillabaisse. "But somehow he's found a gimmick that has us stopped cold, and we can't make another move against him until we figure it out."

Duris said nothing. He teased apart chunks of fish with his fork and spoon and ate while his friend from Customs laid out the problem.

"His specialty is diamonds. He gets them uncut in Belgium—they cost less that way, so if they get seized he doesn't lose as much money—then he smuggles them into this country and has them cut here."

"Well, he seems to have found a perfect way to get them in. He set up a corporation in Belgium as a front. Each day a courier flies in with paperwork from the company. But about once every three months he's loaded with diamonds too. That way, the odds are about a hundred to one against us if we search him."

"Search him every day," the Inspector said, pulling a clam from its shell.

"We did that at first," Adams said. "But we're talking about a really thorough search—tearing out linings, pulling heels off shoes.

"About the fifth time we did it, Moran's lawyers were all over us. They claimed we were harassing him because of his past record. Said he's a legitimate businessman now and we're persecuting him for crimes he's already paid for. They finally got an injunction preventing us from interfering with him. So right now our hands are tied."

"Get the diamonds after they arrive," said the Inspector.

"That's the problem," Adams said with a hint of despair. "He's got it timed to the split second. As soon as the diamonds come in they're scattered so quickly we can't get our hands on them. Even if we could, by that time the link with Moran would be broken. We might be able to convict some of his people but we'd lose him."

"Tap his information," Duris said, pushing his bowl away. The problem was beginning to excite him.

"We did. It didn't work. You see, each day he gets a letter from Belgium by Air Mail Special Delivery. It always says exactly the same thing—except for the date, which is always three days *after* it arrives here.

"Something in those letters tells him when the diamonds are coming, but we can't figure out what it is. We've been intercepting them for months. I've got a stack of photocopies an inch thick: they're all the same. We've checked everything—punctuation, spacing, typeface, all of it. Every letter is exactly like every other. But there's *something* that tells him when the shipments are coming in."

"The only difference is the date?"

The Inspector was now leaning forward eagerly with his elbows on the table.

"Right. For example, if a letter arrives on the third of the month, it's dated the sixth. We know the date is when the stuff is due to enter the country. That way he has three days to make his plans.

"But the date doesn't tell him which letter is the real one and which ones to ignore. And each letter is dated one day after the last one. It has to be something else that tips him off."

"So what do you need?" Duris asked.

"We have to break the code. We need to know exactly when the diamonds are coming. As we see it, we've got one more chance to get

the evidence. If we blow it again, Moran's lawyers will have a field day. After that, even if we catch him with the goods we probably won't be able to find a judge that will admit it as evidence."

"I'll need to see your operation," Duris said.

Adams leaned back in his chair and smiled.

The next morning the two men climbed to the third floor of a run-down office building. A front room overlooked Moran's office and had been turned into a makeshift observation post. At the window a plain-clothes agent sat on an old-fashioned swivel chair and looked through a telescope.

"Any action?" asked Adams as he and Duris entered the room.

"Are you kidding?" the agent answered, rising from his chair and moving stiffly around the room.

Inspector Duris sat down in the chair and focused the telescope. A well appointed office slowly came into view. A secretary had just come in and handed a bundle of envelopes to a man who sat with his back to the window.

"We're in luck," Duris announced. "The mail just came in."

Moran selected one of the letters, unfolded it, and walked slowly to the window. There he held the paper at arm's length and appeared to squint at it. Duris couldn't be sure about that, though, because the telescope wouldn't focus well enough to let him see his quarry's face in detail.

After reading the letter, Moran walked to a small desk at one side of the office.

He sat down, pulled a sheet of paper from the drawer, rolled it into a typewriter, and started typing.

"He does his own typing?" Duris asked.

"The secretary does most of it," Adams answered, "but when he gets the letters from Belgium he sends copies to his local people. He always types them himself."

"Have you intercepted any of them?"

"Yes. They're just copies of the originals. All of them are exactly alike."

"Let me see one of them."

Adams sifted through a bulging, oversized envelope and produced a slightly crumpled photocopy, which he handed to the Inspector. Duris took the letter and read it.

Antwerp, Belgium
23rd August

Dear Mr. Moran:

Please be advised that your instructions have been carried out. The merchandise you ordered has been obtained and will be sent to you forthwith.

Please let me know if I can be of further service to you in this matter.

Your servant,
Jas. Winderhaaven,
Secretary

"What about this signature?" asked Duris.

"It's always the same," Adams said. "Oh, there are the normal differences between one handwritten sample and another, but we can't find any pattern. We don't think the code is in the signature. Do you want to see other copies for comparison?"

"No. I need to see the originals."

"No problem. Do you think you can figure it out?"

"I've already figured it out. I just need to tell you when the next shipment is due."

The next two weeks passed on a steady routine. Every morning Pete Duris stopped by the post office and checked the daily letter before it was carefully resealed and sent on to Ryan Moran.

One morning, after looking only briefly at the letter, he reached for the postmaster's telephone and punched out the number of the Customs office.

"Frank, it's three days from today. That'll be September eleventh."

"Are you sure?"

"I've got the letter in my hand right now, and that's the date on it—September eleventh."

"Great! How did you do it?"

"After you get your evidence you can buy me lunch. I'll tell you then."

Frank Adams made a muffled remark about milking a good thing and hung up.

The Inspector labored to crack the claw of a very large lobster while

his friend rehearsed ways to tell his supervisor how much this was costing. Not that it wasn't worth every penny. Ryan Moran was going to go to prison for a long time, along with several of his cronies. The diamonds had been seized—they would have been worth half a million dollars when cut—and the smuggling ring was out of business.

"Well?" Adams couldn't wait any longer. "How did you figure it out?"

"Easy. You ruled out all the obvious possibilities: punctuation, spacing, and all that. So the code had to be in what was left."

"There was nothing left."

"Sure there was. Moran didn't have to read each letter when it came in. I'm sure he knew its contents by heart. But he pretended to read each one."

"Sure, to throw us off the track."

"No. To get the code. Then he typed copies of the letter himself. But if it was the same message each time, his secretary could have done that. There had to be something more than what was written in the letter. Something his secretary would have recognized as the signal if he had trusted her to do it. That's why I had to see the actual letters."

"But if the code wasn't in the letter, where was it?"

"In the paper. On the key dates, they used a different brand of paper. It all looked the same, but each brand has its own watermark. When Moran took the letters to the window and pretended to read them he was really holding them up to the light to see the watermark."

"Damn!" said Adams, spilling some water in his lap. "And that's how he passed the code on to his people."

"No doubt. That's why he had to type the letters himself. If he had told his secretary to use different paper she would have known that was the key. He couldn't take that chance."

"It's all so simple." Adams leaned back in his chair and smiled broadly.

"If you can figure it out." Inspector Duris grinned, and motioned the waiter to bring another bowl of melted butter. "That's why some of us eat better than others."



Frank was back home after seven years . . .

THE TASTE OF REVENGE

by
**EDWARD
WELLEN**



I hate folks that toot sharp for you to come on out toot sweet. I was on a creeper under an Olds, replacing the muffler, and I saw this Jaguar tool onto the apron. I was about to shove myself out on the creeper; even got the casters started swinging, when the toot-toot sounded. The damn fool should've seen he was riding over the signal hose and that a bell would ring automatically.

I stayed under the Olds, tightening a clamp that was tight already. The

toot-toot sounded again, longer, harder. I folded my arms over my union-all chest and tightened my mouth.

I heard the Jaguar's door open and slam and saw a man's feet coming toward the shop. They moved gracefully around the rainbow splotches on the apron, high noon glinting off the toes. The feet stopped, aligned alongside my head. Sharp tan cuffs rested lightly on the tops of brown-calf wingtips.

A voice with the cut-out open said, "Hey, wake up!" and I saw one shoe raise up and draw back.

Before it could kick forward, I swung out on the creeper. The hardwood frame struck his anklebone. I spilled off the platform of the creeper and in stumbling to my feet I clutched at the immaculate tan pants. This part was hard to make seem accidental, because the man was hopping around at the moment, but then I reckon the pain kept him from thinking of that.

I said, "Sorry, sir. I had no idea you were standing so near." I didn't care if he believed me or not.

The man's head was bent. He was rubbing his ankle and just becoming aware of the black fingerprints.

The air grew full of a silence that smelled like sulphur.

I still hadn't got a look at the man's face. But the carefully combed carelessness of wavy yellow hair ignited recognition.

He looked up.

"Hell!" he said. "This is some homecoming!"

I stared at his angry face.

"Gee, kid," I said, when I could speak, "I'm really sorry."

His face cleared slowly and he smiled. He always had a smile that could turn your heart over.

He started to put out his hand, hesitated when he saw my greasy paw, then bravely kept it moving.

"Wait a minute," I said. "One minute more on top of seven years."

He twisted his face up in thought and nodded reminiscently. "That's right, it's just about seven years." He looked out at the acres of blue grass fenced in across the road. "It hasn't changed. Still the sticks."

I wiped my hands on a ball of cotton waste.

Even so, his soft smooth hand shrank in my grip and quickly slipped free. He tried to make it up with the loud voice and the big smile. "You look just fine, Ernie."

I indicated his suit, his car. "You haven't been doing bad yourself."
"I can't complain," he said. He took the silk handkerchief out of his breast pocket and touched it to his brow and his upper lip and his neck. "Hot." He smiled. "The old man and the old lady home?"

I was slow in answering him. I didn't like the way he spoke of Ma and Pa. "Yeah."

He took a step toward the doorway and turned.

"You coming?" He glanced at his gold wristwatch. "Time to break for lunch anyway."

"I bring my lunch," I said. "But I'll close for an hour. Hell, it's a holiday!"

"Fine!"

He saw me hesitating.

I said, "Gotta lock up. You go on and surprise 'em. I'll follow along real soon."

"Right. Oh, say—"

"Yeah?"

"O.K. to leave my car here? You might go over her later and see if she needs tuning up."

I couldn't have missed the sweet sound of a perfectly tuned motor when he tooled her in, but I said, "I'd be glad to. I've never seen one of these babies close up. We don't get them in this neck of the woods, you know."

He smiled. "I know."

He went to the Jaguar and patted its metallic green side. He heaved a rich leather suitcase out.

I said, "I'm glad to see you're staying a while, Frank."

He hefted the suitcase. "Don't let this mislead you. My plans are still up in the air. I just want to freshen up and get into a change of clothing."

He looked down at the fingerprints on his pants' legs and then gave me a forgiving smile. I felt my cheeks burn. "I really am sorry, kid."

"Nothing."

He waved and started walking. As he turned the corner he waved again.

I could've gone with him; I didn't need much time to lock up. But I was waiting for a sound. The sound of one horsepower.

I shed my unionall and scrubbed my face and hands raw. Ethel liked me better in a business suit and with reasonably clean face and hands.

I rubbed salve into the seams and cracks of my hands, for all the good it would do, wet my hair and combed it, and put on my tie. I was getting into my coat when I heard the hoofbeats, and I buttoned my coat on the run.

Ethel, bent low, looking almost like a boy in jockey cap, man's shirt, and blue jeans, was whipping the roan stallion across the pasture in high—straight at the unjumpable fence.

She pulled him up short at the last fraction of a second, making the stallion strike soundless sparks from the air with his forehoofs.

My heart was misfiring, but Ethel was laughing, and I knew it was no use telling—or begging—her not to be so reckless.

I scaled the fence and jumped down inside.

The stallion nosed at the pocket of my coat. I scooped out some lumps of cane sugar and let him rasp my palm.

Ethel looked down at me with a pout. She poked me in the belly with her riding crop and I saw that I had misbuttoned my coat. With my free hand I buttoned it right.

"Now am I fit to kiss?"

She raked me with her eyes, cocked her head on one side, and after a long still moment suddenly stirred. She tore off the jockey cap, spilling her flaming hair, and was off the stallion in a flash.

The stallion had to nose the last lump out of the blue grass.

In her lighting on the ground and in the feel of her body against mine she made lies of the man's shirt and the blue jeans.

I came up for air only when the butt of her whip jabbed me in the small of the back. Then we stood there simply looking at one another, she gravely, myself, I suppose, smiling foolishly.

Ethel all at once lifted an eyebrow and smiled. "Why're you racing your motor, Ern?"

I thought I was holding myself in, but she sensed excitement even beyond the excitement she caused. I couldn't talk right away. She looked for my lunchbox.

"Aren't we sharing your lunch today?"

"My brother's home!"

She stared at me. "Frank?"

I nodded.

Her eyes switched to lower beam for a minute. She slashed at the grass with her whip. The four hundred and fifty dollars I had saved up to buy

me a wheel balancer sparkled on her engagement finger. When she spoke again, her voice was cool.

"I'm sure it will be nice to meet him again after all these years."

I looked at her in surprise. "Come on, Ethel, don't be like everybody else around here. I know they all think he's good for nothing. But he's doing fine now. Look there, see the Jaguar? That's his."

She gave it a long look. Then she turned and smiled at me. "All right, Ern. I'm impressed. I'll be very, very glad to see him again."

"Then walk home with me."

Her sudden changes of mood always baffled me. Right now she seemed almost shy.

"No. Not just yet." She flicked the roan with her crop. "I have to remind Daddy to fix the latch on this bad boy's stall. Can't allow philandering on a stud farm."

I gave her another kiss. She broke this one up more quickly. And she was on the stallion and drumming away.

I walked the three blocks home kicking pebbles. I didn't know why; it was a kid thing to do.

Frank was in snappy powder-blue. He had changed to black shoes too. Ma was busy with the tan pants and she asked me if I minded helping myself to the veal, she wanted to work on the stains before they set. She loosened the dirt and the fine bits of metal by rubbing lard in and then sponged with carbon tet, while Frank kidded her. I silently cursed myself for giving Ma extra work.

But she seemed to be getting such pleasure out of doing for Frank. A sweet smile lit up her face. She was looking as young and alive as when I was a kid.

And Pa too was enjoying himself, taking in Frank's sharp clothes and sweet talk. Pa's chest was as big as if an air hose had just given it twenty-eight pounds. He hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his vest and winged out his elbows. *One* of his sons was in the heavy sugar.

Well, the other son had to get back to work.

I finished with the Olds and my mouth watered looking at the Jaguar, but I had tubes to patch and spark plugs to clean before I allowed myself the luxury of exploring her innards. I also gave away air for tires with three layers of fabric showing and water for a couple-three steaming radiators, and sold a buck's worth of gas.

The bell sounded as a car rolled over the signal hose.

I had just spit on a likely spot on a tube and the invisible leak was bubbling the spit. I set the tube down on the bench so's a wire buffing brush would be pointing to the hole, and went out. The sun was on a slant by this time and I shaded my eyes.

It was a black Cad, long as a hearse. It stood on one side of the pump island, the Jaguar stood on the other. It held two men. Both were in dark-blue. The driver was pale and thin, the other was dark and fat. They were looking at the Jaguar. They turned to each other. The dark fat one got out.

The pale thin one gave me a swift glance and said, "Fill up the tank." His voice was pale and thin. "High-test."

By the time I had the spout in the tank the dark fat one was at the door of the restroom. He moved fast for a man his size and I half smiled.

He stuck his right hand in the pocket of his jacket and with his left flung the door open. He stepped in. He came right out. He gave the pale thin man a shake of his head.

By now the half smile had frozen on my face.

My jaw worked stiffly when I said, after hooking the hose back on the pump, "Check the oil, sir?"

The pale thin man nodded. His eyes were flickering between me and the other man, who was looking into the shop, the Jaguar, the Olds.

Under the hood I worked my face free, thinking, That's what they are—hoods.

I checked the dipstick. They had come a long hard way. I poured in a quart of oil while the dark fat man took a stroll around the building.

I started to wipe bugs and bug juice from the windshield.

"That can wait, Philip," the pale one said.

So Philip's the dark fat one's name, I thought, and I kept on wiping.

"I said that can wait, Philip," the pale one said, and I saw he was talking to me.

I said, "My name is Ernie." I pointed. "See?"

He glanced up at the sign—ERNIE'S SERVICENTER—then turned his eyes on me again. He shook his head.

"Philip. Your name is Philip. Philip the Tank." His voice had no expression in it at all.

I almost jumped when the dark fat one spoke. I hadn't heard him come up behind me.

"Philip." His voice was deep and hoarse. "Philip the Tank." He made a choking noise way down in his throat.

I tried to smile. "That's right," I said. "My name is Philip."

"No, it isn't," the pale one said. "Your name is Ernie." He pointed to the sign. "See?" He shook his head sadly. "Now why do you lie to us?"

"We want you should tell us the truth, Ernie," the dark fat one said. His hot sickly sweet breath was close to my ear.

The pale thin one nodded at the Jaguar.

"That car belongs to a friend of ours, Ernie. We're anxious to talk to him. Tell us where he is."

I knew I couldn't be silent long. I began answering before I had my answer really thought out.

I heard myself saying, "All I know is, that there foreign heap broke down and the man driving it left it here and got a lift to Luketown."

The pale man said, "Luketown? Why Luketown, Ernie?" There was the shadow of doubt on his brow.

The dark fat man was breathing closer. He said, "Philip might lie, but not Ernie."

I heard myself saying, "Luketown's a fair-sized place, where he can get a room in a regular hotel. Ain't no place good enough for him around here. Besides, from there he can grab a train to Baltimore, where he said he had some business, if I can't get this thing running." I scratched my chin. "I dunno. I might have to send away for parts. I'm supposed to let him know when he phones tomorrow morning."

There was no sound but the dark fat man's breathing.

"Baltimore," he said after a minute.

The pale thin one nodded. "Pimlico," he said.

And I knew that somehow, without planning it, I had said the right thing.

I reckon some part of my mind had recalled that Frank had come from the direction of Louisville, where the Derby had run a week ago. And that same part of my mind had recalled that the big one at Pimlico was coming up next week.

The hot sickly sweet breathing faded away and the dark fat man got into the Cad. I was praying Frank wouldn't pick this minute to pay me a call. The pale thin man kept his eyes on me as he drew out his wallet. I told him what the gas and oil came to. He handed me a fifty. I looked at it.

"It's good, Ernie. We have them made specially for us by the U.S. mint."

"It ain't that," I said. "It's just I don't think I can change it."

"Who asked for change, Ernie? We give our friends what they deserve."

I felt the first chill of coming dusk.

The fifty trembled in the wake of the Cad. I hoped that was what made it tremble.

I waited until the Cad was around the curve on the road to Luketown. Then I put the fifty in the till.

I moved slowly to the phone on the wall outside. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe they were really friends of Frank's and he'd be mad because I had misled them. Or he might laugh. But I had to tell him.

I was almost at the phone when the red glint of the sun on glass reached the corner of my eye. I didn't turn. I sensed more than I saw—a dark fat figure standing at the curve of the road studying me through binoculars.

I walked past the phone to the Jaguar. I took a look at the engine. I monkeyed with the distributor, the carburetor. I stood up, took a step back, and scratched my chin.

I moved to the car door. In the rearview mirror I saw, dim and small, the dark fat figure.

There was an auto robe folded on the seat. I shook it out and spread it over the driver's seat to keep from soiling the leopard upholstery when I sat down. I started the motor after a few coughs. I drove the Jaguar around the apron. It bucked and halted and finally stalled. I got out and took another look at the engine. I took a step back and scratched my chin again. I moved to the car door.

The mirror showed the dark fat figure disappearing behind the curve.

I got in and started off again. This time the Jaguar jumped only a few feet before it died on me. I got out and looked at the engine. I shook my head in slow despair. I was pretty sure I had no more audience but I made out to be tinkering hit-or-miss while I readjusted the carburetor and the distributor.

For a minute I forgot the two men. Something about the car had begun to bother me. I looked more closely at the engine serial number. Someone had stamped ones into fours and threes into eights.

I got my head out, stepped back, studied the car.

And there was the paint job. It would pass casual inspection, but

someone had been in a hurry to spray green over tan.

I remembered to glance in the mirror. No sign.

Even so, I spent another few minutes just standing looking at the car as if hoping she would move by herself.

Then I shrugged, both to play the part and to say to myself chances were there was no need to play it any more. I headed for the restroom.

I slipped by it and made for home. Not directly, but by a way that screened me from a possible watcher.

When I drew near to the house, I heard music and dancing.

They didn't hear me come in.

Ethel, in her best party dress, and her hair drawn back smooth and shiny as sunset on a stream and tied in a ponytail, was whirling around with Frank. Her skirt swirled away from her calves, spun higher, showed white flesh. Ma and Pa were dancing too. The tune on the radio was "Ain't She Sweet?"

Ma and Pa broke off their dancing, winded, and stood laughing out-of-breath laughs and clapping time.

They were first to see me. They smiled and kept on clapping. I smiled back.

Ethel and Frank saw me. They didn't stop. Ethel gave me a wave and Frank gave me a wink. I wanted to cut in and tell Frank about the two men, but I held back.

It could wait a bit. No use scaring Ma and Pa half to death. Luketown was fifteen miles away. The two men would waste at least some time checking at the hotels. Frank had maybe an hour, an hour and a half at the outside. It could wait a bit—but not too long.

I was glad when the song ended and a commercial came on and Pa turned the volume down. Ma laid out coffee and cake. Pa wondered what brought me. I told him I wanted to see Frank about his car.

Frank looked over from seating Ethel. He asked Ethel to excuse him and moved to my side. He smiled. "My car? Thinking of buying her, Ernie?"

I smiled and shook my head. I said, low, "It isn't really about the car. It's something else. I think it's important."

He lifted an eyebrow and smiled. "Important, hey? Let me get a cup of java first."

He moved to the table. Ma poured him a cup. She looked at me and raised the pot. I shook my head no.

Frank's hand held on Ethel's when he passed her the cane sugar. "Sweets to the sweet," he said. And the way he said it, it sounded sophisticated. Anyway, Ethel seemed to think so.

He moved back to me. "Quite a gal you have there, Ernie."

I reckon Ma had told him. Or the diamond on her finger had made him ask Ethel herself.

"Yessir," he said louder. "Ethel's quite a gal."

Ethel caught her name and said, teasing, "You didn't think so when we were kids."

Frank teased her right back, winking at me. "Why should I think so, about a scrawny little pigtailed tomboy?" He looked at her and smiled. "But now is something else again."

He turned to me at last and asked me what was so important.

In a half whisper I told him. I described the men.

The cup rattled a bit in the saucer. He said, in the same kind of half whisper, but to himself, "I thought I had a few days' lead."

"If it's bad," I said, "I mean if they're out to—to harm you, we can call the sheriff."

By now he had absorbed the shock. He smiled as if he was tasting something sour and finding it funny. "The sheriff!"

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Only thing I can do—keep going." He gripped my shoulder and shook me a little. "I'll be down for the Jaguar in a short while."

I didn't know what it was all about, but I remembered the look of the pale thin man and the dark fat man. I nodded.

There was nothing more for me to say. I felt uneasy standing there beside him, with Ethel looking across at the two of us, her eyes shifting from one to the other.

I stirred and said, "I'll leave it to you to break it to Ma and Pa. I have to get back."

"Sure, sure," he said, thinking of something else. There was some compression of his mouth.

As I left, Ethel's lips blew out. It might've been a kiss, it might've been to cool the coffee.

Pa walked over with a heavy step. I came out of the shop, where I was doing nothing but watch the tubé on the bench grow smaller, to meet him. He said he just came to see the Jaguar.

He saw it and was proud. But his eyes were puzzled. "Why can't he at least stay overnight?"

"Important business, Pa, I reckon. But he'll be back."

"That's right. He'll be back."

And he walked away with a lighter tread.

Frank walked over, carrying his suitcase. He shoved it in the car and then came to where I was standing. He took me by the arm and said, "Let's go inside."

We went inside. It didn't come to me until long afterward that he had worked it so's I had my back to the doorway.

"Well, Ernie," he said, and I was wondering why he spoke so loud, "like I said before, this is a fine homecoming!" He stared past me into the evening. "Look, Ernie," he said, and I was wondering why he spoke so low, "can you let me have whatever cash you have on hand?"

I reckon I stared at him.

"Oh, I'll pay you back," he said.

"It isn't that," I said. "It's just I thought you were in the heavy sugar."

He smiled his sour-funny smile. "Tell you the truth, Ernie," he said, still keeping his voice down, "I'm broke."

I know I stared at him.

"That's true, Ernie. I did have my hands on a bundle, but it belonged to somebody else. A big wheel. He wants it back—or else. I dropped it all on the horses." He smiled a twisted smile. "Looks like it's going to be 'or else'."

I opened the cash drawer. "I'm afraid I don't have that kind of money."

He laughed. "I know you don't, Ernie. All I need is enough to put some distance between me and those friends of mine."

I handed him the fifty and the other bills. He riffled them. He made a face. "This all you got?"

He looked in the empty drawer.

I spread my hands. He shrugged, then he turned on a smile so sweet I could almost taste it.

"Well, thanks a million, Ernie. I'll send it back first chance I get." I put up a hand. "No, no, I mean it. I'll repay you soon as I'm able."

One thing I couldn't understand. "If you need money, Frank, why do you put up this big front? You could've sold the Jaguar and pawned your watch and your luggage."

"Pride, Ernie. Pride. I couldn't come home with nothing to show for seven years of being away." He snapped the fifty and smiled. I'd told him the pale thin man gave it to me. "At least it's nice to know the ones who're after me are helping foot my getaway." He pocketed the money. "Well, Ernie," he said, and again I was wondering why he spoke so loud, "I'd better say so long."

I wiped my right palm on my unionall and we shook hands. "Where you heading?" I asked.

"Down the long black road," he said. He smiled. "No, I'm taking the side road far as it goes. From there—" He stopped and shook his head. "Maybe it's best you don't know just where I'm winding up, if you know what I mean."

I thought I knew what he meant, but he seemed to be saying two things at once.

I watched him go out in the dark to his car. He fussed with the blanket on the seat and heaped it beside him, muttering to himself.

"Want a hand?"

I made to come out.

He said fast, "No."

He started her up. I reckon he got a look at the fuel gauge. "Hey, Ernie, how about filling her up? I'd hate to get stalled on a lonely road, if you know what I mean."

It struck me funny he didn't come right out and say what he meant. Then I thought, well, he doesn't want to think about what would happen if those two caught up with him.

"Sure," I said. "Back her up to the pump." I hurried out. I felt bad I hadn't thought of filling her up.

He backed up and cut the motor.

I stuck the spout in the tank. I hope he makes it, I thought. I looked at the back of his head and smiled a sad smile. Fine homecoming!

Then I saw an arm steal out from under the heaped-up auto robe. A diamond sparkled as the hand wound around Frank's neck.

He shook his head sharply as if in warning and quickly shoved the arm down under the robe. He shot a look into the mirror.

My head was down, my eyes on the spout. And my heart was snapping like a cooling motor.

I shut off the flow of gas but left the spout in the tank. "Wait a minute, Frank," I said. "I just remembered my wallet."

I went inside where my coat was hanging. My fingers were numb as I felt through the pockets. I came out and handed him the few bills I found in the wallet.

"Thanks, Ernie," he said. His voice was hoarse.

I turned on the flow of gas. My mind was blank until I heard him say, "That should do it, Ernie." He sounded anxious to be on his way.

I drained the hose and replaced the cap.

He switched her on again and waved. The Jaguar should've handled like a dream, but Frank was nervous or Ethel was teasing him. He got off to a jackrabbit start.

My eyes followed the dimming taillights.

Headlights swung onto the apron. The bell sounded.

I had unhooked the air hose and was about to coil it and put it away for the night.

It was the Cad.

This time both men got out. They came toward me. They stopped.

The pale thin one stood with his feet at a slight camber, rocking on the outer edge of each sole.

"Why did you lie to us?" he said softly. "Your name isn't Philip. It's Ernie Nerf. Frank Nerf is your brother." His voice grew even softer. "Which way did he go?"

I said nothing.

He drew a pistol.

I whipped the air hose at him. He backed away fast. I started to whip it at the other, but he was already behind me and in a second I was in his clutch.

First the dark fat one held me so I couldn't dodge or block while the pale thin one swung his pistol butt right and left. Then they cross-switched. The pale thin one held me for the dark fat one.

I slumped to the ground when whoever was holding me at the end let go.

Water hit me like a slap.

The watering can clattered on the ground.

"Now Ernie'll tell us the truth."

"Which way did he go?"

I told them.

"You believe Ernie told us the truth?"

"I believe it."

"Even so, we'll never catch Nerf in that heap of his with the lead he has on us. And first chance he gets he'll ditch it and glom another."

A kick in the ribs.

"Well, we gotta try. Let's bug out."

I heard the Cad drive off.

My head was full of screeching brakes. The globe of the gas pump had taken off into the sky. Then I got my bearings. I saw it was the moon.

In my mind there was something pressing me. I had done something. Or I had to do something. Which?

I got to my feet and stumbled to the faucet and splashed water in my face. I leaned against the doorway of the shop. The inner tube on the bench caught my eye. It had shriveled. Was that the something I had to do?

Vulcanizing would keep till tomorrow. Time to knock off, if that was all.

I shed my unionall and scrubbed my face and hands raw. I rubbed salve in the seams and cracks of my hands, wet my hair and combed it, and put on my tie. I was getting into my coat when I heard the hoofbeats, and I buttoned my coat on the run.

The roan stallion was waiting at the fence.

I managed to scale the fence and let myself down inside. I held onto the fence, exhausted, hurting.

The stallion nosed at my pocket.

I put my hand in. It came out empty. Both of us looked at the empty hand.

Now I knew what I had done.

"Sorry, boy," I said. And whether I was talking to the horse or to Frank I don't know.

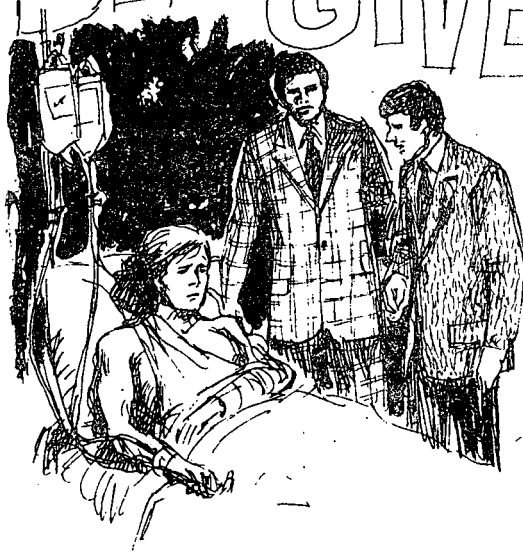
The sugar was in the tank of the Jaguar. Gumming up the engine. Stalling it on the lonely road.

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Meet Amos Grant, Boston private investigator . . .



DEAD GIVEAWAY



by
**JOHN
MACNAB**

The first bullet spat against the container body about an inch to starboard of his ear, and the second bit a chunk out of his upper arm as he hit the deck. He moved crabwise in the dark before silence could settle in and scuttled on his belly between two stacks of skids and in under a cargo loader, hitching back against the axle and clamping himself quiet, listening. The reports of the guns had died as soon as they went off, their bark dispersing into the open night air without echoes.

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"Sonny?" The whisper came from maybe two points left, twenty feet away.

"Shut your yap." Directly behind him, maybe ten feet away. Too damn close.

Grant breathed through his mouth. His exhalations sounded to him like a walrus dragging a hundred-pound bag of potatoes across an ice floe, and his left arm felt as though he'd been thrown off a moving train. He hoped it wasn't broken. He wasn't concerned about the bleeding for the moment.

"You get him?" Closer.

"I dunno. Can't see for nothing." The one behind him was a little farther away now, moving left. Better they got together.

"Who the hell's in here? There ain't supposed to be nobody in here."

"Just shut *up* a minute."

A long silence. Backfield in motion. He heard one of their feet squish on the asphalt, mashing grit. They must be wearing sneakers or track shoes. Grant felt completely vulnerable—as in a nightmare, hiding under the ogre's dinner table waiting for the tablecloth to lift. The horrid, goitered face leers in. He managed to get the .45 steel-frame Commander unclipped from the waistband at the small of his back. He was waiting for the bigmouth, the one whose name he didn't know yet, to say something again.

"Sonny?" Grant worked the slide. God, but his arm hurt. "What if he ain't dead, Sonny?"

"He ain't, dummy. He just cocked a gun."

Yup.

"Come on, let's get out of here!"

"Just shut your face."

There they were, right—there. Grant came up on his feet and made three points of contact, bench-resting the .45 on a stack of pallets, and let go three rounds. The automatic slammed off with a tremendous racket. He dropped and moved left, into an aisle running between the piled skids, then stopped, attentive. His bad arm ached from the recoil.

Scrambling feet were running away. Far up overhead he could hear the occasional eighteen-wheeler traversing the central artery, the expressway—the expansion inserts in the roadbed clattered as the tires passed over them. It was four o'clock in the morning, and cold inside the perimeter of the outdoor cargo area—desolate, lonely, and dark.

"Sonny?" Real weak. Close at hand. "Don't leave me, Sonny. He's killed me. Don't let me die here. Mom'll murder me. Hey, Sonny?"

Silence.

Grant tucked the gun away in the small of his back again. The left sleeve of his windbreaker was ballooning with his own blood, seeping out through the elasticized cuff at his wrist.

"Grant? I'm Callahan, Metro division. This is Dirks." Callahan was big and Irish, Dirks was big and black. Both wore plainclothes, and neither one bothered to show him a shield.

Grant looked from one to the other. He settled on Dirks, who stood like a wooden Indian. "This is equal opportunity? He does the talking, you stand to one side looking intimidating?"

He was still doped up, sitting only sort of upright on a trundle bed in the Mass. General emergency room with a jug of whole blood and a jug of dextrose plugged into his right arm. His left arm was in a sling bound tight against his ribs and diaphragm.

Dirks shifted the focus of his big muddy eyes to Grant's face from a point somewhere in the Twilight Zone. "No, Mr. Grant. I have the power of speech. As for intimidation, I was on the Tac Squad from the time it was mobilized until it was disbanded last year, so I've stomped a few. You don't look to me as though you'd last the time it takes to crack an egg."

"Grant. It says here you're a private dick." Callahan had Grant's wallet open at the foot of the bed, and Grant's photostat, handgun permit, PI card, driver's license, business cards, and assorted plastic credit spread out in front of him on the paper sheet. "You ever kill anybody before?"

"No," Grant said. "Nobody ever gave me the chance."

"You've seen too many old Warner Brothers movies, Mr. Grant," Dirks said. "This isn't Ward Bond and Tom Tully giving Dick Powell the business. You shot and killed a man early this morning. I don't doubt it was justifiable homicide. We'd just like to know how it happened—how you came to be there. Who are you working for, Mr. Grant?"

"I've been retained by a private bonding firm, Keller Associates. There have been a lot of thefts—wholesale thefts—from that containerized-cargo handling area down by the North Station. Television sets, high-fidelity components, precision equipment. Data-processing hardware. Home furnishings. Restaurant and hotel supplies. Insurance pays for the stolen

DEAD GIVEAWAY

goods but they're putting the bite on their clients—the shippers and the jobbers. Everybody's clamoring for improved security procedures to hold the line on underwriters' premiums. Keller bonds the guards, and they asked me to check it out."

"The guards are paid to look the other way," Callahan said.

"I don't know that for a fact, and I'm trying to break myself of the habit of jumping to conclusions on the basis of inadequate information."

"I don't know, Mr. Grant," Dirks said. "Everybody likes results. You can produce a dead bandit, and that's more than you had yesterday. There's an active State Police investigation on this hijacking activity, but this is the first time anybody's been made."

"One professional to another, that's a compliment? No, thanks. I don't like shooting people. I don't like people shooting at me."

"I didn't say you were professional, Mr. Grant. You're jumping to an unwarranted conclusion. I think you were damn stupid to be in there alone."

Callahan broke in. "Do you always carry that much cannon around?"

Grant took his eyes slowly off Dirks. "No. I don't usually carry a weapon at all. I analyze problems, primarily in physical security. In-house inventory theft, that kind of thing. But computer embezzlement too. Fraud. The first thing I did with this one was check the duty roster against the incidence and period of theft. I wasn't interested in the names of who was on what shift—not yet anyway. I wanted to plot a curve—probability, opportunity. Last night looked good. I went in alone—" he glanced at Dirks "—because I went in over the fence. I took the route I'd take if I were casing the place cold. I took a gun—" he looked back to Callahan "—just in case I got shot at."

"You make yourself look pretty good, Mr. Grant." Dirks. "But you don't think those hoods were in there casing the place cold. One of the assumptions you appear to be going on is that this is a well organized gang. Same general grouping of goods, same M.O., strong intelligence network, good organizational structure."

Grant paused. "Yeah. That's an assumption I made after I traced possible resale conduits—what markets are available, who handles bulk shipment, whether or not the gang is filling specific orders for particular types of merchandise."

"Like cars, you mean." Callahan. "A guy in Tucson wants a red Pontiac Firebird with factory air and a cassette tape deck. So somebody boosts

a red Firebird off the streets of Boston—or Baltimore—to fill the order.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“You know what you’re saying, Mr. Grant?” Dirks.

“I’ve got a pretty good idea.”

“So where does the stuff go from here?” Callahan.

“Providence, Rhode Island.”

Callahan and Dirks looked at each other.

“This guy’s on the ball,” said Dirks.

“Yeah. Regular what’s’isname, Lord Peter Flimsy.” Callahan looked at Grant. “That’s not exactly a hot tip. The mob’s got connections to flog stolen goods all over the country. So far I’ve got what you’ve got. I read the *Globe* Spotlight Team reports.”

“I’ve got something else,” Grant said.

“Really?”

“I’ve got a line on the jobber.”

“What’s the name?”

“Not just out of here,” Grant said. “Tractor-trailer depots in Framingham, Worcester, Springfield—different territories. The guy who coordinates intelligence, personnel, requisition, and shipment is a businessman named Louis d’Agostino. He lives out in Newton Highlands. Two-hundred-thousand-dollar house—swimming pool, tennis courts. Kids in private schools.”

“He’s got an Italian name and he sends his kids to private school. That makes him a mobster?” Dirks. “I’d send my kids to private school if I could stand the vig. I’m sick of seeing them get beat up.”

“I didn’t know you had kids,” Callahan said.

“You guys wouldn’t do too well on the Newlywed Game,” Grant said.

Dirks and Callahan looked at each other again.

“Mr. Grant,” Dirks said, “I assume you’ve heard of the Organized Crime Strike Force—that’s the Feds—and funding and grants-in-aid subsidized by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration? You realize that reasonably current lists are maintained of suspected and confirmed mob laundry operations—companies that wash their money, in other words?”

“Yeah, I’m aware of it,” Grant said.

“Do you happen to know that Keller Associates is a wholly owned subsidiary of Fleetwood Mechanics, Inc.?”

Uh-oh, Grant thought.

"And do you happen to know that the majority stockholder and chief executive officer of Fleetwood Mechanics, Inc., is Louis d'Agostino?"

"I'm a chump," Grant said.

"There you go again," Dirks said. "Thinking you can read my mind."

"O.K., Dirks," Grant said. "I'll feed you the straight line."

"I think you're in over your head, Mr. Grant."

He couldn't have said whether he was expecting both phone calls but he'd solicited the first one and he was looking forward to the satisfaction he hoped to get out of it.

"Mr. Grant?"

"Speaking."

"Ada Holsinger, Keller Associates—Mr. Chenowith's secretary. Mr. Chenowith is returning your call."

"Sure."

"Just one moment, please."

Grant cradled the receiver awkwardly, reaching for a felt-tip pen and a legal pad with his free hand. The sling was binding. His upper arm itched like crazy under the dressing.

"Amos? Ray Chenowith. Have I understood correctly? You mean to withdraw your services and consultation?"

"That's more or less it, Mr. Chenowith."

"Why?"

"Nothing personal, Mr. Chenowith. Maybe you're in the blind; maybe you've just got deniability. But it stinks."

"Explain, please, Amos."

"Mr. Chenowith, I don't feel all that chummy, and I'm aware of the German pedagogic method, like cops: call you by your first name. So call me Grant or any free-associating epithet that comes to mind but don't address me by my Christian name."

Silence.

"It's tricky enough to be cute, Mr. Chenowith, this little scam, but it's not tricky enough to be *nice*, if you know what I mean. I shot a man to death last night after myself receiving a gunshot wound in the left arm. And that was followed up by a visit from the police."

"I'd be more than a little shaken up, Mr. Grant, if I were in your place. But I inhabit a different situation altogether. In any case, congratulations on your good luck and your good aim."

"I don't feel so great about it. It's the first man I've ever killed, and it doesn't help that he was trying to kill me. I just want out."

"Whatever you think best, Mr. Grant. I'd still like you to tell me why."

"Mr. Chenowith, your firm is owned by a company called Fleetwood Mechanics? Owned by a man named Louis d'Agostino? What does that name mean to you?"

"It means a man I've met socially on one or two occasions; generally in pursuit of business. I'm low man on the totem pole here. I don't get to mix much with officers above flag rank, so to speak."

"It's a rare man who ducks applause, Mr. Chenowith."

"I'm not ducking the applause, Mr. Grant, or the responsibility. Pretend you're speaking with an honest man, if that's not too great a suspension of disbelief, and tell me why you're dropping the case."

"You hired me to penetrate the physical security at the North Station cargo-handling area with an eye to plugging the holes. Considering the pressure you were under from the collateral underwriters, it's interesting that you took it on yourselves to initiate such an inquiry. Because Keller is essentially pre-empting the effort which might have been made by the insurance companies to conduct an independent investigation."

"I'm listening."

"A cargo ring like this one couldn't operate without good inside intelligence from the transit shipping firms, or even from the manufacturers. So they know what's coming. Or they can influence what's shipped, or even what's made. At the other end, you have to be assured of your market. All that's left is to nail down the middle—the routing. It's common knowledge that a lot of trucking companies, for instance, are under the thumb of organized crime. But you don't even need those guys. You can have it shipped, legitimately, to any place you'd like it picked up."

"You're saying this involves the Syndicate, Mr. Grant? That Keller—or, rather, Fleetwood—is a front for organized crime? That the man who shot at you last night was a mobster?"

"Nothing quite so dramatic or easy to explain as that, Mr. Chenowith. It happens the guards were on coffee break, or in the john, or riding around the block. It just happened, that's all. I'm not looking for a bonus or combat pay. I want out."

"It sounds to me, Mr. Grant, as though you're finding out what we hired you to find out. I'd think the risk went along with the job."

"That's insult to injury, Mr. Chenowith. Don't try so hard not to un-

derstand me. I'm telling you, the people in on this series of jobs not only have up-to-date information on what goods are *in situ* at any particular time, and they not only have ease of access for transfer and redistribution of the goods afterwards, but they have control of the security apparatus from the top. Any investigation you put in motion is in-house. That's how you stay in touch."

"You're accusing me of being an accessory before the fact to grand larceny."

"Not in so many words, no. In the event you summarize this conversation for a report, the bottom line is this: I want out. I want to be completely shut of it. No fallout. No feedback. No deep Mediterranean voices on the telephone heavy with menace. Do you get it? I mean *out*. I'll take my expenses out of your advance and return the balance."

There was a pause. "That's not necessary, Mr. Grant. I think what you've told me is worth the price. I appreciate your concern." Another pause. "What about the police? You're confident of their support?"

"No, Mr. Chenowith, I'm not. But you don't have to buy me off, and you don't have to run interference for me with the cops. There are two Boston detectives investigating an assault with intent—that's intent to commit grievous bodily injury. On me. There's an ongoing State Police investigation into the thefts. There are probably Federal agencies involved. Somebody might pay you a call."

"I don't welcome their attention, but that's the way it goes."

"Yeah."

"Sorry to lose you, Mr. Grant."

"Sure. You don't hook a sucker like me every day."

He hung up, with a sense of righteousness cashed in. The sense of the abyss of overdrawn credibility came next. The phone rang again.

"Grant?"

"Speaking."

"You don't know me, but—"

Yes, he did. He recognized the voice. "Sure I do, Sonny. How's tricks?"

"Tricks is shaky, you bastard. I just got one thing to say. I'm going to fix your wagon, buddy." The phone went dead.

Grant tapped the disconnect button, got a dial pitch, and punched up the police. The dispatcher put him on hold, relayed the call through to Detectives.

"Metro. Dirks."

"Dirks? Amos Grant. I've just taken a couple of phone calls you might want to hear about."

"By all means, Mr. Grant. I try to keep myself informed."

"First, I phoned Keller Associates around lunchtime. They just now got back to me. Man name of Ray Chenowith, an Executive V.P., the guy who hired me. I told him he could stick his job in his ear."

"The smarter move, Mr. Grant, would have been to quit but to play dumb. Not to have insulted anybody at the other end and not to have shown off."

"He wanted to know why I wanted out."

"Getting shot at isn't enough?"

"He wouldn't buy it."

"You wouldn't buy it. You shot your mouth off to Ray Chenowith because you want a better reason than the jitters to quit."

"Maybe so, Dirks. Is that your professional opinion?"

"Just advice. Smart remarks aside, what went down with Chenowith?"

"Look, I don't make it my business to antagonize people. I just don't like the runaround."

"Did you mention d'Agostino?"

"His name came up."

"Who brought it up?"

"I did."

"Dumb, Grant. Or maybe dumb like a fox. They might try to take you out, you know."

"Maybe so. The second call I got was from Sonny."

"Who's Sonny?"

"The guy who shot me."

"This is getting interesting. What did Sonny have to say?"

"He said he was going to kill me."

"Really. Are you making a complaint of threat?"

"I guess I am. Do you guys have a make on these birds yet?"

"Not on Sonny. The guy you twisted was named Al Bompensiere. We released his body to the family this afternoon. How did you know it was Sonny—did he identify himself?"

"I recognized his voice. He was ten feet away from me at four o'clock this morning and he had murder on his mind. I'm not about to forget."

"Too bad you didn't get them both."

"Yeah. I figured you for that kind of crack. You know, the way you're

going, you might not get a make on this guy until you catch him standing over my still-warm body."

"Could be. At least we'd have a make—and a case."

"That's a comfort."

"It wasn't meant to be."

"Yeah. Sorry. I don't have any reason to give you a hard time, Dirks. And I don't think I can do any better on my own, by the way—but I'm going to go after him just the same."

There was a pause. "You shouldn't do that, Mr. Grant. You'd be interfering with an active police investigation, for openers."

"Do you blame me?"

"No, I don't blame you. If I were you, I'd want to see some action. But your motives are questionable. I don't mean your just wanting to protect yourself. Let me put it this way: here's a guy who shot you in the course of committing a felony. He's subsequently threatened you. It might be reckoned a public service to put him out of the way, but if you go looking for him, and you find him, there are only two ways it can go. First, he might kill you—"

"That's what I'm trying to prevent," Grant interrupted.

"Right. Second, you might kill him, or anyway bang him around a little bit."

"It wouldn't be more than a little bit—not with my arm in a sling."

"O.K. Let's say you shoot him, then. You see where I'm headed? It's not going to look much like self-defense this time around. It's going to look like a vendetta—like premeditated murder."

"I don't much like that, Dirks, 'self-defense this time around.'"

"Be sensible, Mr. Grant. Maybe if you shoot this dude Sonny it won't land you a jail term. But at the least, it's going to put you in dutch with us—it's going to bury you, shut you out for good. You couldn't touch d'Agostino or anything connected to him with a ten-foot pole. Any evidence you might produce would be tainted."

Grant thought about it a minute. "O.K.," he said. "That means I only get one shot at it."

"That means you get no shot at it, Mr. Grant. We're investigating the circumstances surrounding a homicide. The States are investigating a series of hijackings. You've given your client notice that you're resigning. This is an official caution. Stay out of it."

"What if I don't carry a gun?"

Pause. "That's one way around it. Sonny will just blow your head off, and there's an end to it."

"I'll let you know."

"Mr. Grant, I'm going to do my damndest to get you in jail on a criminal complaint sometime in the next twelve hours. For your own protection."

BOMPENSIERE, Albert. In Boston, March 31st. Beloved son of Teresa (Sciarappa) and the late Carlo Bompensiere of Boston; brother of Charles Bompensiere of Quincy, George of Malden, Francis of Boston, Mrs. Teresa Lampedusa of Everett, Mrs. Angelina Spadefora of Revere. Also survived by several nieces and nephews. Funeral from the A. J. Fiore Funeral Home, Parmenter St., Boston, on Thursday, April 2nd, at 9:00 A.M. Funeral Mass at the Church of the Blessed Redeemer, 10:00 A.M. Relatives and friends may visit on Wednesday, 2:00-4:00 P.M. and 7:00-10:00 P.M.

"Mrs. Bompensiere?"

The woman in her late thirties who had come to the door turned back into the apartment to call. "Mama?" She turned back to Grant. "This isn't a good time, you know. We're getting ready for people," she said.

"I'm sorry to intrude. It has something to do with your—brother?—Albert."

"Brother, yes. His funeral's tomorrow. Mamal" She turned again, opening the door a little wider, deferring to the older woman, who shoosed her out of the way.

"Thank you, Teresa. I can tend to this. Go on, go on, now. Back in the kitchen with your sister. There's plenty to do." She looked at Grant. "How can I help you?"

"Mrs. Bompensiere, I'm with—"

"BOM-pen-siere. Not 'bump.' You're not Italian?"

"No, Mrs. Bompensiere. My name is Gage, Abbott Gage. I represent—"

"You selling? I'm not buying."

"No, no, Mrs. Bompensiere. I represent Matheson Financial Services. I'm looking—this is awkward, Mrs. Bompensiere—I'm looking for an associate of your late son's. He defaulted on a—"

"You're a skip tracer. Sure it's awkward. You're lucky my daughter even opened the door to you. Since I gave her such a lecture yesterday about running my life and being a nosy-bones, she's suspicious, but she doesn't interfere—today. It won't last."

"Mrs. Bompensiere—"

"Listen. Something you should know. We're not the kind of people who carry tales about our neighbors, family, people we know. Credit investigators, bill collectors, people like that—we don't open our homes to. I won't ask you in. I'm sorry I'm rude, but it's your business. You're in your line of work, you take the consequences."

"I understand. I'm sorry about your son."

"Don't be. He was a criminal. But—he was my son. He should feel his mother's doing the right thing by him even though she didn't have much pride in him when he was alive."

"I'm sorry about that too, Mrs. Bompensiere. It can't be easy. I want to find a man named Sonny. The last name he gave—"

"Castello. A hoodlum. He got my son killed. He's worthless. He's even ashamed of being Italian. Changed his name—he calls himself Sonny Castle now."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"He lives out of his pants pockets. Or other people's pants pockets. He was sponging off a girl in Jamaica Plain a couple of years ago. He fancies himself a ladies' man. She was a tramp. Last I heard, he had an apartment on Beacon Street, Roslindale. A slum, you can depend on it. I wouldn't have him in my house. I wouldn't have him at my son's funeral. You'll find him at home, sulking, drinking beer. He's a bum."

"Thank you for your time, Mrs. Bompensiere. I'm sorry I picked such a bad day to—"

"Why not? Yesterday I wouldn't have answered the door, tomorrow I'd have nothing to say to you. Listen, Mr. Whatever-your-name-is—Gage—you don't handle this too well. You got a pleasant face. Find another line of work, something more respectable. I mean, at least you got a job, it's true. But you ought to find something people could like you better for—you get me? Goodbye." She shut the door.

He went down the stairs. Like what that people could like him better for? There wasn't much Grant liked other people better for.

Coming out of the North End he thought he might have picked up a tail, but either he lost it or they gave up. He didn't see the same car

twice all the way to Roslindale, where he stopped at the first phone booth he could find with an intact directory.

He sat in his car outside Sonny Castle's apartment house, thinking it through. It was late afternoon. The sidewalks were deserted. Trash fluttered lifelessly on the pavement. Cars went by with the windows rolled up and the doors locked. It was a crummy neighborhood. Nice once, maybe; nice once again, maybe. Sometime, not now. He sighed and got out of the car.

It was an old frame four-decker. It hadn't been painted since the Curley administration. The gutters were rusted through and collapsing. There were no screens. In the last light of the afternoon the house looked like a derelict dying of the cold in a Stuart Street doorway.

Grant went up the front steps and checked the mailboxes. Sonny Castle was fourth floor rear on the left. Not too smart—he couldn't even reconnoiter the street from the safety of his apartment. Grant cast about for the buzzer panel, figuring to work the trick of hitting every button but Sonny's to get through the street door. There wasn't any buzzer panel, no intercom, and the lock on the door was kicked in. Grant stepped into the foyer.

It smelled tired. Dirty, yes, and cold; but tired—an old aroma of cabbage, urine, bicycle oil, mildewed newspaper.

He went up the stairs. The runner was long gone off the staircase, but brass retainers still edged the treads where they weren't missing altogether or bent up and snapped off erect—tetanus traps. The risers were scuffed. It was a long, still climb. His feet occasionally struck a loose edge and the brass clicked against the wood. Nobody opened any doors to look. He walked along the fourth-floor corridor and knocked on Sonny Castle's door.

"Yeah?" The voice was dull and belligerent.

"Sonny?"

"Yeah, yeah. Whaddaya want?" Sonny opened his door.

"Hi," Grant said.

"Hi, yourself. Who the hell are you?" He wasn't as big as Grant had expected. Whether that was going to make it easier or not, Grant couldn't tell.

"I'm Amos Grant."

About thirteen different things happened in Sonny's face all at once.

"Take it easy," Grant said. "I don't have a gun. I just want to talk."

"You're outta your mind. I got nothing to say to you."

"You alone?"

"Yeah. Listen, wise guy—"

Grant kned him. Sonny folded over with a soft cough and Grant took hold of a handful of hair. He bounced Sonny's face off his knee and then banged his head into the side of the doorframe. He went down like a big sack of peanut shells.

Grant pushed Sonny's arms out of the way with his foot and stepped across him into the apartment, closing the door behind him. He worked his right hand into a disposable surgeon's glove, bent over, and flipped Sonny onto his stomach. It took him much too long to tape Sonny's wrists behind his back with the roll of duct tape. Sonny was starting to come around. Grant hoisted him one-armed, dragged him over to a straight-backed chair by the wall, and sat him upright in it, hooking Sonny's arms over the back of the chair. He looked as though he'd keep for a while.

Grant went through the apartment. It was a bachelor pad, but not the kind you bring girls to for romance and candlelight. Mrs. Bompensiere had been right. It was a slum, littered with soiled underwear, crushed beer cans, torn candy wrappers, and soggy cardboard pizza boxes.

The kitchen was noisome. He decided to skip it for the moment.

He hit the bedroom—which was it, except for the bathroom and the sitting room. He didn't bother with approved procedure for a search—starting with the bottom bureau drawer and working up so you didn't have to shut an upper drawer to see into a lower. He just pulled the drawers right off their runners and dumped the contents on the floor. Nothing. And nothing taped to the back of the drawers or against the inside back face of the bureau when he pulled it out from the wall. He dismembered the skimpy wardrobe in the closet. He jerked the mattress off the box spring, tipped up the spring, shook out the pillows.

He went into the bathroom, looked at the underside of the lavatory, took the top off the toilet tank, unscrewed the float mechanism, and shook it. He checked the medicine cabinet, tasted the tooth powder, inhaled a quick spritz of the nasal decongestant. It cleared his sinuses all right, just the way it was meant to. He flipped on the overhead light. The bulb was burned out, so he took down the globe and looked inside.

He went back into the sitting room. Sonny was nodding a little, groggily. Grant turned on the TV, tuned in the roller derby on UHF, and

moved it around so Sonny could see the screen when he came to. Then he took the room apart. He found the .38 Smith stainless under the sofa cushions. Grant checked to see it was loaded and tucked it into his waistband. He'd taken the chance he'd mentioned to Dirks, and he'd told Sonny the truth—he'd left his gun in the office. He hadn't even brought it with him in the car.

Well, that left the kitchen—if there was anything he could turn up with a cursory search. He returned to the sitting room and removed the back panel of the TV set. Nothing inside but transistor circuits. He went back to the kitchen.

There was nothing in the icebox but a quart of sour 97% fat-free milk, two eighteen-ounce cans of Carling Black Label, and an open box of baking soda, probably left by a previous tenant. The cupboards were bare. The broiler tray was green with old, congealed grease, but Grant plucked it out anyway with a dirty fork. The sink was cluttered with roaches. Like pimps, Grant thought—the world's oldest parasites.

He found it when he opened the access door underneath the sink. There was an oilcloth wallet taped to the back side of the basin where the water lines passed through to the faucets. He thought it might be drugs stashed in waterproof packaging, but as soon as he fingered through the tearsheets and flimsies he knew exactly what he had. A dead giveaway.

He took the packet into the sitting room and squatted down next to Sonny.

"You awake, Mr. Castle?"

"Nnnng." Sonny wasn't quite composed.

"This isn't the kind of thing you ought to leave around the house, Sonny." Grant held up the oilcloth packet. Sonny didn't respond. Grant reached up and pinched the bridge of Sonny's nose, hard.

Sonny spat, shook his head, and mumbled something Grant didn't catch.

"Say again, Sonny?"

"You son of a bitch, you broke my bridgework."

It was hard to understand him—Grant had to give him that. He poked Sonny in the gums with the barrel of the .38 and used the front sight to pry his teeth apart for a look. "Say, hey," he said. "Sorry 'bout that."

Sonny called him something in a garble that sounded like "cough-sufferer."

"Now, come on, Sonny," Grant said. "You offered to kill me. You were

expecting maybe a CARE package from Pete's-A-Pizza?"

"I will too," Sonny said. "You're dead, buddy."

"I've got the gun, Sonny," Grant reminded him.

"It don't matter. Uncle'll take care of you."

"You mean Mr. d'Agostino? Or you mean some muscle top-heavy with hair tonic brought in on spec from Providence?"

"I got nothing to say to you. You're dead."

"I don't think so, Sonny. I don't think you've quite got your wits about you. The police are already in on this. Maybe the States. Maybe the FBI. If I get knocked off it's not going to look good. There's no hard evidence but there are plenty of questions. Some of those questions are going to get asked. Killing me would make one more connection—and you're the missing link."

"You're full of —"

"Might be, might not. I think you're the one who should worry about Uncle. You're the one who shot me. You're the one who was on the spot the night before last. You're the one who got careless, and you're the one who's been building up a little library here that can tie a can to Louis d'Agostino."

"You're crazy."

"No, Sonny. I think they might just take you out. For insurance. That's what this is, isn't it? Insurance—blackmail."

Grant put the gun down on the floor and spilled out the contents of the packet. "Shipping invoices, bills of lading, advance-cargo manifests. Stuff out of dispatchers' offices, off clipboards and crates. It's an inventory of stolen goods. And nestled right alongside in the same envelope we have requisition slips, traffic-forwarding assignments, receipts acknowledging delivery on consignment. Photocopies of Fleetwood Mechanics, Inc., paperwork. Hot stuff, Sonny. Do you lift them from the files yourself or do you get someone to make copies and pass them on to you? Maybe it doesn't match up grain for grain, but weight, total number of pieces, shipping dimensions; it'll get you fifteen to twenty in Walpole. And then the Feds get a crack at you. I don't know if it's enough evidence for an indictment on Mr. d'Agostino but it's enough for a court order—breaking into Fleetwood's books. It's going to be embarrassing, Sonny, no matter what turns up. And even a set of cooked books are going to reflect illegal traffic somewhere. I think your Uncle knows how capable you are of embarrassing him, and I think he's going to cut your strings."

Grant picked up the gun and stuck it back in his pants. He gathered up the documents and packed them back in the oilskin. "Do you mind if I use the phone, Sonny? I know you've got one because I looked you up in the phone book." Grant shook his head. "Sonny, I'm serious. Mr. d'Agostino plans to give you an unlisted number and put you on hold for keeps."

He went into the bedroom, rummaged in the bedclothes, and hunkered down on the floor to telephone. He worked the oilcloth package into the sling next to his ribs while he waited for the dispatcher to patch him through. It was a tight fit, stuffed in between the elastic outer dressing and the web retaining strap; out of sight and secure, but very uncomfortable.

"Metro. Dirks."

"Dirks? Grant. I got him."

"Oh, Christ. Is he dead?"

"He's a little the worse for wear, but he'll stand the test of time. And time's what he's going to do. We had a little talk, Sonny and I, and then we played show and tell."

"Where are you?"

"Somewhere within the sound of your voice, Dirks. You sit tight. I'll bring him in. There's just enough extra baggage—we can splash Louis d'Agostino with tar from the same brush."

"If you're serious, Mr. Grant, and you plan to whack Louis d'Agostino, you'd better whack him hard. And don't miss. He's not a forgiving man."

"I'll take my chances."

"You already are, Mr. Grant."

"I'll be there inside the hour."

"You do that thing," Dirks said, sounding disgusted, and hung up.

Grant had heard something from the other room. The latch on the door? The action of a handgun? He pivoted cautiously on his heels, lifting the .38 out of his waistband, coming slowly to his feet. Sonny was still in the chair with his arms behind his back, staring into the bedroom at Grant with fixed hatred.

Grant stepped through the door into the sitting room.

Then the lights went out.

The floor was hard. He didn't think he'd ever noticed previously how hard a floor could be. He managed to raise up kind of like a cow, hind

end before, and went over slow onto his right side, like a bag of kitty litter.

The second time he tried it he began by levering with his shoulders and settled for rolling onto his back, over on top of his good arm. It was then he realized how bad his left arm felt. He closed his right hand around the .38 Smith and sagged up onto his right elbow. The taped grip and stainless steel of the gun-frame were room-temperature and intimate. He looked at his hand. The surgical glove had been stripped off and his bare skin was in contact with the metal.

It was dusk outside; early evening in the apartment.

Grant finally got weakly to his feet. He'd never been 'sapped before in his life.

The television was still on. Welcome to the evening bad news. Grant limped over to the straight-backed chair tipped against the wall and examined Sonny in the murky light from the window.

Sonny's jaw was cracked open far enough to fit in a whole orange. There was a ragged bullet puncture in the roof of his mouth, radiating the burst cracks of capillary damage and the silvery black residue of powder burn, and the top of his head was gone.

"Well, there's one good thing, Sonny," Grant told the dead man, tipping out the cylinder on the Smith. "I'm glad they thought this was my gun. I don't have to tell you, the police already have ballistics specifications on the weapon I shot Al with." Sure enough, the spent cartridge was under the hammer. "Looks like you and me all the way, Sonny," Grant said, and stuck the gun back in his belt.

He felt his left arm. They'd dropped him on it, and then they'd gone through his pockets and probably rolled him over on the arm a couple of times just for kicks; it felt as though they'd wedged a brick between his ribs and the injured biceps. The brick turned out to be the oilcloth packet.

Grant looked around. He wondered how much time they'd given him. Probably they wanted him just barely conscious when the boys in blue arrived. Whatever conjecture, whatever evidence he might have on Fleetwood Mechanics would be toilet paper in his hands when the cops broke in on him with the body, and the murder weapon down his trousers front.

Sonny had an eight-by-ten polyester shag rug on the floor, rubber-backed. Grant rolled him up in it. Sonny was still limp and fluid-clogged,

unresisting. How long before rigor set in? Grant was going to have to look that up sometime.

He went to the door and looked out and down the empty hall. He hoisted the load up on his shoulder, with a lot of trouble, and staggered out, leaving the television going. He got the door to the apartment shut somehow. Since he had to pull it to, it was like trying to push Sonny up a ladder.

Those three flights of stairs! Grant thought. He swayed along the hallway to the landing. But down he stumbled; clanking on the tread edgers as he jolted heel-first from step to step.

His thighs gave out in the ground-floor foyer, and he let Sonny roll off him onto the cracked and blistered linoleum tile. There still wasn't another sign of human life. Grant dragged the rug over to the mailboxes and then went out into the street and opened the trunk of his car. He looked up and down the sidewalk and made up his mind. He went back, got Sonny up in an amateurish fireman's carry, and tottered down the steps. His inertia took over and he bounced off the side of the car before lading Sonny into the trunk like a big broken salami wrapped up in cotton batting and shutting the lid. He went around to the driver's side, climbed in the car, started it up, and got out of there. Would there be anybody to give the police a description of the vehicle, or the guy who staggered out of a Roslindale firetrap with a bleeding rug on his shoulder?

He drove straight to the nearest open liquor store and bought two half pints of Dewar's in separate bags.

"Hello?"

"Mr. d'Agostino, please."

"Just a moment. Who's calling, please?"

"Ray Chenowith."

"I'll see if he can come to the phone. Hang on a minute." She put the receiver down on a surface near the instrument.

Grant could hear social sounds on the other end of the phone—late cocktail party, early dinner party, or half a dozen kids and the television going. He hung up.

He had pulled over by the bus stop at the intersection of Yeager and Walnut, at the foot of the hill, to use the pay phone. Now he drove up Yeager Avenue and cruised past the d'Agostino home. Streetlights pretty bunched up. It was a wealthy suburban neighborhood, high tax base,

roomy building lots, architect-designed houses, swimming pools, tennis courts. Clones, all of them. There were seven vehicles in d'Agostino's driveway: two ranch wagons, a Cadillac Seville, an Olds, a BMW, an Alfa, and a Toyota Land Cruiser. Commuter chic. There was a fair amount of good cheer inside the house, although the noise level was nearly inaudible. Subdued lighting, silhouettes on the drapes.

He turned around two driveways up, drove back to the foot of the hill, turned around again, and parked for the second time next to the phone booth. He called the Newton police.

"Police Department? I wish to report a disturbance at 461 Yeager Avenue—that's in the Highlands. They're having a wild party over there and the din is simply intolerable. My wife has just gotten out of the hospital after a very serious operation, and she's unable to get any rest at all."

"All right, sir. Your name, please?"

"I don't see the need, Officer. I'm merely asking you to enforce the law. There is a noise-pollution ordinance in this town, after all."

"Yes, sir. We're aware of that. But I do need your name and place of residence in order to process the complaint. It does not become a matter of public record, sir."

"Very well, then. My name is Glaser, Jack Glaser. And I live right across the street. Directly across the street, do you understand? And this is absolutely the limit! It's just too much."

"Yes, sir. We have a cruiser in the vicinity, and we'll have them look into it as soon as possible."

"How soon is that?"

"Ten minutes at the outside, Mr. Glaser. I'll put it on the radio right now."

"Thank you, Officer," Grant said, in the best acid tone he could muster. "I'd appreciate your not coming up here with your siren going and your lights flashing. This *used* to be a quiet neighborhood."

"We'll keep it low profile, Mr. Glaser," the desk dispatcher replied equably.

Grant hung up. He knew damn well what they paid taxes for in this community.

He drove back up the hill, cutting his headlights as he eased up abeam of the d'Agostino drive. He tipped up the last little dividend in the first bottle of Scotch and tossed the discard on the seat beside him. He waited

a couple of nervous minutes. Nobody in the house had noticed his car on the street in shadow, and the party, sedate as it was, showed no signs of breaking up.

He'd already dumped the gun—sliding the cylinder off the pin, pulling the spent shell, wiping down the frame and the grip and the cylinder and the cartridges, putting the frame and the five live rounds remaining into one of the liquor-store paper bags and twisting it closed, and the cylinder in the other. The frame and ammo went out the car window into the Charles River Basin as he went over the Longfellow Bridge and the cylinder had gone off the Western Avenue bridge as he crossed the river from Cambridge back to Brighton, headed for the Pike. The dead shell he stamped flat under his foot and threw out on the highway.

Time. He didn't plan to cut it that close.

He got out of the car, went around the back, and opened the trunk. He manhandled Sonny out of the spare-tire well in his swaddling clothes and let him down on the grass verge. He shut the trunk lid. Wrestling back a corner of the collar of carpet, Grant stuffed the oilcloth packet down Sonny's shirt. He dragged the lumpy body a couple of steps further from the roadside, took a grip on a handful of carpet, and spilled the corpse out onto d'Agostino's front lawn. The police cruiser turned the corner by the bus stop. Grant left the shag rug on the grass and drove away.

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CRIME ON SCREEN

by Peter Christian

She was “the Cleopatra of Old Thames,” the queen of the Golden Age detective story, as Julian Symons says in his introduction, and *The Bed-side, Bathtub & Armchair Companion to Agatha Christie* (Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., \$9.95), edited by Dick Riley and Pam McAllister, is a fitting homage to that great lady: a large-sized, amusing, much-illustrated compendium of everything the Christieophile is likely to want to know. There are articles about movie adaptations of her work as well (written by contributor Michael Tennenbaum), plus some gorgeous examples of poster art reproduced in color. The movie items, though terse and vague in spots, remind us of Miss Christie’s solid contributions to crime on screen.

Surprisingly, despite her output, Dame Agatha was less frequently represented in the movies than other best-selling mystery authors. (Conan Doyle of course, but Edgar Wallace and Earl Derr Biggers as well. However, more “A” productions were derived from her books than from those by Biggers and Wallace.) Tennenbaum quotes English film historian Leslie Halliwell as rightly saying, her “innumerable puzzle plots have been strangely neglected by filmmakers.” In truth, though, a mere eight years after her first book was published, adaptations of Christie works appeared on the screen—one in Germany, one in England.

The German film industry was in the middle of a flirtation with English mysteries (becoming fond as well of Sherlock Holmes and the Edgar Wallace thrillers). In 1928 it did a version of the Tuppence and Tommy

Beresford spy novel, *The Secret Adversary*, retitling it *Adventures Incorporated* (*Die Abenteuer G.m.b.H.*). Interestingly, there is much reference in the original book to the sinking of the *Lusitania*! That same year, in England, an enterprising producer named Julius Hagan (who was later to bring Sherlock Holmes to the British screen) adapted "The Coming of Mr. Quin"—a domestic, was-it-the-wife-or-was-it-a-tramp murder puzzle—to the screen as *The Passing of Mr. Quinn* (*sic*).

In that year, too, a moustached Charles Laughton starred as Poirot in a very successful stage version of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, called *Alibi*. In 1931 *Alibi* was brought to the British screen with tall, commanding Austin Trevor in the role. Trevor, a familiar stage actor, was totally wrong for Poirot—Tennenbaum reports he confessed he was probably cast because he could do a French accent. Yet the British moviegoing public accepted Trevor as a detective figure—he was to impersonate Hercule twice more, and actually had already played Inspector Hanaud (for whom he was also inappropriate physically) in the 1930 film adaptation of *At the Villa Rose*.

Alibi suffered because it could not incorporate the book's first-person narrative, therefore missing *Ackroyd's* final-page punch. *Black Coffee*, filmed the same year, was taken from a plot Christie had fashioned as a stage play and therefore fared better as cinema drama; it dealt with the poison murder of a scientist who has invented a force "by which we can now kill hundreds of thousands." The final Poirot film of the decade was *Lord Edgware Dies* (1934), which retained much of the flavor and climactic surprise of the Christie book of the previous year—in which Lady Edgware, an imperious American actress, learns how unlucky it can truly be to count thirteen at dinner. (In 1939, Orson Welles's Mercury Players devoted an hour to *Roger Ackroyd*, and by the mid-forties Hercule Poirot was to star in his own American radio series, the first program introduced via Atlantic cable hook-up by Agatha Christie herself.)

The first American film company release of a Christie property—although filmed in England—was United Artists' *Love from a Stranger*, drawn from the popular short story "Philomel Cottage" (a radio and later a television staple). Basil Rathbone was properly neurotic as the wife-murderer first wooing and then menacing Ann Harding—two years before he was thought of as Sherlock Holmes. Exactly ten years later the film was remade with John Hodiak and Sylvia Sydney, an "Americanized" version which suffered in comparison but is unfairly forgotten. The per-

CRIME ON SCREEN

formance by Hodiak, very much cast against type, is worth watching—especially at the end when the full moon rises and, mind crumbling, he begins to suspect his wife has poisoned him in self-defense.

The first large-scale Christie film was undertaken in 1945 when the celebrated French emigré director Rene Clair assembled on a Hollywood sound stage a distinguished cast of character actors for *And Then There Were None*, based on the play *Ten Little Indians* (from the book *Ten Little Niggers*). “None” is not quite the right number, for like the stage variant there are two fewer victims than in the book, but the film is all a mystery movie ought to be—just about the perfect screen melodrama. Ten strangers are invited to an isolated island house and accused of various murders by an unseen host, then found dead one by one.

Among the many memorable scenes: the uneasy romance between Louis Hayward and June Duprez under the stars, the guarded conspiracy between Barry Fitzgerald and Walter Huston across an eerily lit pool table. The film was remade twice: in 1965 the setting was changed to an Alpine hotel reachable only by cable-car, and in 1975 everyone is stranded at an abandoned hotel in the Iranian desert. (Both remakes were scripted and produced by the redoubtable Harry Alan Towers, and aside from the scenery changes the lines are virtually interchangeable.) Tennenbaum’s humorous essay comparing all three versions is first-rate.

The next Christie film was also a superior screen achievement—Billy Wilder’s outstanding adaptation of the play, *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957). In the director’s skillful hands the already well constructed drama was embellished and improved at nearly every point. Marlene Dietrich’s performance was also a solid contribution. (The book repeats a rumor that in the pivotal pub scene Dietrich was doubled; Billy Wilder insists to COS this was just not so.)

Surprisingly, for nearly two decades afterwards Christie was ignored by American films—although there was a flurry of adaptations in England. Glynis Johns starred as the madcap heroine in a rather compressed version of *The Spider’s Web* (1960), seen here only on local television. Then Margaret Rutherford, panting and determined, took on the Miss Marple role for four British mystery films beginning with *Murder She Said* (1962). Only the first was taken from a Marple book (*4:50 from Paddington*)—the next two films were actually based on Hercule Poirot investigations, and the last movie was an original screenplay. (Of that film, Christie commented: “It got very bad reviews, I’m glad to say.” She didn’t think too

much of Rutherford as Marple either.) In 1966, Tony Randall portrayed Poirot in *The Alphabet Murders*, aided by Robert Morley as a gout-inflicted Hastings of the Secret Service, and both Margaret Rutherford (in a Marple cameo) and Anita Ekberg made appearances in a film so confused it is almost surreal.

Six years later the most underrated of all Christie films was released in England—*Endless Night*, starring Hywel Bennett and Hayley Mills. The great Sidney Gilliat (who did the screenplay for *The Lady Vanishes* and directed *Green for Danger*) tackled an admittedly difficult Christie novel—just as difficult as the celebrated *Ackroyd*—and fashioned a sensitive, poignant, sensuous drama of young love, murder, and deception. Suffering from the convoluted nature of its shock-surprise ending, and from the lack of a formal detective in the plot, it has been unjustly dismissed. But you will have an opportunity to judge for yourself, as *Endless Night* is just now being released to cable television.

Christie works had already made several appearances on American television—especially in the early years of anthology drama, wherein Gracie Fields once played Miss Marple. But in 1974 Paramount released its spectacular production of *Murder on the Orient Express* to the big screen, one of the great successes of the year, and interest in Dame Agatha—which had never really flagged—blazed anew. Amusingly, the confining nature of the murder-on-a-train story would have made it perfect for the limited budgets of film studios in earlier years—say, as one wag had it, as a mid-forties Monogram vehicle with Bela Lugosi as a guttural Poirot plus Lionel Atwill and Veda Ann Borg among the passengers. But Christie had never allowed the book to be filmed until Sidney Lumet convinced her he could do it well. He most assuredly did; it was to be her favorite screen adaptation. *Death on the Nile* (1978) followed, with Peter Ustinov replacing Albert Finney as the Belgian detective—both interpretations differing but exacting in two very faithful motion pictures.

The success of Christie films these last few years insures more to come. In Fall 1980 *The Mirror Crack'd* begins shooting in London with Angela Lansbury as Marple, and four two-hour features are soon to be prepared for American television under the umbrella title, *Agatha Christie Theater*. The shades of Poirot (dispatched in *Curtain*) and Marple (last heard from in *Sleeping Murder*) can rest easy: they both for us will be bedside, bathtub, armchair, and *cinema* companions for decades to come.

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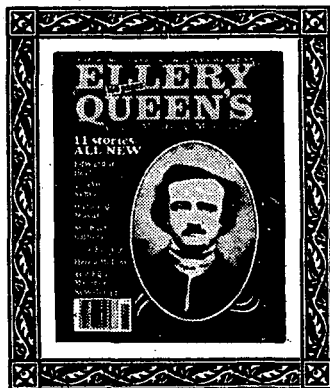
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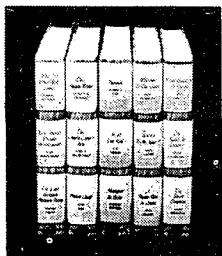
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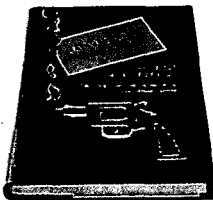
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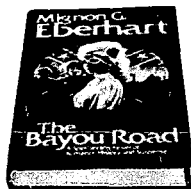
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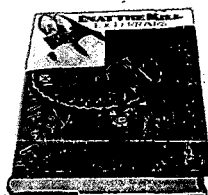
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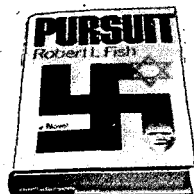
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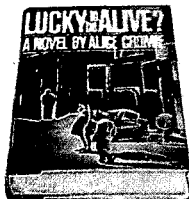
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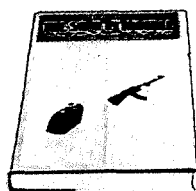
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